“Your silence can seriously damage someone’s health”: Getting Zimbabwe protest songs heard

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Abstract

It is not until the 1970s and 1980s that popular music becomes the medium for the message in the protest songs of Zimbabweans. The protest song becomes a voice for many who suffer in silence because they cannot speak up against what is going on – what is called mubikira. This article discusses how two recent popular protest songs about the ongoing political, social and humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe disseminate their message through lyrics, musical style and the media and technology, engaging with Street’s (2006) distinction between music which intends to be political and music in which the politics derive from the interpretation.

Keywords: Africa; protest song; Zimbabwe; musical style; political.
INTRODUCTION

African popular music has a history of “express[ing] group conflict within the context of social change” (Collins 1992, p. 190) in many countries of the continent. This article discusses Zimbabwean popular protest songs, focusing on two songs about the recent and ongoing political, social and humanitarian crisis in the country, where protest song has become a voice for many who suffer in silence because they cannot speak up against what is going on. Through discussion of the songs and their songwriters – one Zimbabwean, one non-Zimbabwean – an understanding is sought of how protest music’s message is disseminated through lyrics, musical style, the role of media and technology, and also the persona of the singer/musicians. The article engages with Street’s (2006, p. 50) distinction between “intention and interpretation - […] music […] intended to be political and [music] in which the politics derive from the interpretation of that music”. After a brief overview of Zimbabwean popular protest music follows discussion of the two songs and how they disseminate their message.

PROTEST SONG

For John Shepherd (1991, p. 83), “music stands in the same relationship to society as consciousness: society is creatively ‘in’ each musical event and articulated by it”. Protest songs position themselves within society and communicate “even to those who can’t read and write”, says Denselow (1989, p. xvi), yet this communication requires effective lyrics, musical style with which the disaffected can identify, ways of being heard, and a person/group to sing the songs. Drawing on Dave Laing’s (cited in Street 2006, p. 50) distinction between “protest music” and “music of resistance”, in which the former are “explicit statements of opposition” and the latter “coded or opaque”, Street describes Laing’s former as where “politics are a product of an explicit intention of the performer”, contrasted with where “music is interpreted as being political […] irrespective of the intentions of the performer”. He finds that state censorship can interpret songs as being political where the intention was not.

With Western popular protest songs, Street (ibid., p. 51) notes, “the more explicitly political the song, the lower the chart placing”. Correlating “how particular times and experiences become incorporated into the music […] impl[ies] […] a causal chain” (ibid., p. 53), but does not explain how it operates and why certain artists or types of music are affected. He says “genre is an important determinant of the credibility and possibility of political engagement” (ibid., p. 59) and cites how Geri Halliwell (ex-Spice Girl) and George Michael failed to be taken seriously when engaging musically and as ambassadors with political issues. Their “moral capital” (Street is using John Kane 2001’s term) is not convincing. Street (ibid.) finds that “those genres that accommodate politics may differ in the type of politics they sustain”. But genre does not determine political engagement, rather “the politics of a given genre are a product of its relationship to, and the influence of, political parties and movements” (ibid.). He suggests that “we need to look more closely at
how particular aesthetics and particular politics are linked” (ibid., p. 61), an issue relevant to this article.

Within liberal democratic regimes, states can be agencies for connecting music to politics in relation to authoritarian political structures, political parties and social movements (ibid., p. 56). However, where the state is not democratic, musicians become “political as a result of a political process” because “social movements create a context within which music assumes a political role” depending on performers to act as “truth-bearers” (Eyerman and Jamison 1998’s argument, cited in Street 2006, p. 56). While the personal biography of musicians may have something to do with their engaging musically with political issues, the political processes of the country also play a large part, as well as “the networks that organize them into (or exclude them from) political activity” (ibid., p. 57). The biography of the politically engaged musician may tell us about personal values and commitments which have shaped this engagement, but “songs emerge because of what the performer sees and thinks” (ibid., p. 53). Yet Street (ibid., p. 54) finds, “we are left to wonder why as musicians they become politically engaged”. One underlying reason is that “any attempt to connect musical expression to political conditions must place the pleasure derived from the culture at the centre of the explanation” (ibid., p. 55).

Zimbabwean popular protest music

Zimbabwean protest music dates back to early nationalist resistance to colonialism in the 1890s and more intensely in the early 1960s, when it was mainly derived from church hymnals and folk songs with use of politically inspired text. Later use of popular musical instruments began to gather momentum. In the early years of popular music in Zimbabwe, Zexie Manatsa, Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mtukudzi and Tineyi Chikupo were some of the proponents of protest music (Turino 2000; Chitando 2002). These singers projected a subtle persona as their lyrical content was mostly disguised to portray traditional and social beliefs. Few musicians specialised in one genre; a wide variety of musical styles was heard through local radio and the guerrilla station – Voice of Zimbabwe radio based in Mozambique. Chimurenga (liberation war) songs of the mid-1970s focused on the guerrilla war against Ian Smith’s regime in Zimbabwe. While Thomas Mapfumo, a contemporary mbira artiste, played a strong role in the struggle for liberation from white rule, his music won international support as a form of ‘‘world beat’’ music” (Lipsitz 1994, p.12). Leonard Zhakata and Hosiah Chipanga are some of the locally-based sungura pop stars who perform protest music with socio-economic and political connotations. Border Jumper (Timothy Rukombo), a Zimbabwean whose music was judged by the Central Intelligence Organisation to be “inciting the public to rebel against the octogenarian leader” (Ncube 2010), has found an outlet/audience for his music with Zimbabwean long-distance bus operators.

Today, in an effort to appeal to all sections of society, Zimbabwean protest music encompasses a variety of music genres, including reggae, rhythm and blues, sungura, jiti, kanindo, mbira, jazz and urban grooves1. The use of political idiom in
both Shona and English is a common trait. However, some recent popular protest songs have both explicit and hidden lyrical content. In Zimbabwe, music with a slant toward political protest gets censured by the government as radio and television stations are state-owned but the government does not have a legal instrument to completely banish recording of protest music.

“Sakunatsa” and “O Zimbabwe!”

Two songs about the recent and ongoing political, social and humanitarian crisis in the country represent different ways popular songs can serve as protest mubikira, that is, as a voice for many suffering in silence because they cannot speak up against what is going on.

“Sakunatsa”, a sungura song, on the album Mubikira by Leonard Zhakata (ZMC 2001) has been banned from the Zimbabwe Broadcast Corporation (ZBC) and Zimbabwe Television (ZTV) stations. To date, Zimbabwe does not have privately-owned television and radio stations. Shortwave (SW) radio broadcasts from the UK and Studio 7 from the US can be received in Zimbabwe, but neither offer substantial time to protest music and also suffer incessant interference and loss of transmission from the current regime. Nevertheless, songs such as “Sakunatsa” reach listeners both in and outside Zimbabwe. Digital technology has given edge to piracy of music CDs/DVDs and Mubikira is one of many albums sold cheaply through illicit sales in a wide variety of distribution media. Zimbabweans can purchase music CDs/DVDs for just US$1.00 each instead of the retail price range of US$5.00 to 8.00. The perpetrators of piracy sell different types of music, whether censured or not. A demerit of digital technology is that the master is identical to its generational duplicates which are easily made on the computer. Furthermore, the introduction of DVD/CD players, home theatres, computers, car Frequency Modulation (FM) transmitters, the Internet, bluetooth, cell phones and other metadata files have increased transfer of recorded music.

So, despite banishment, “Sakunatsa” remains publicly available; the fight against piracy seems not to have had any notable impact. However, the disadvantage to Zhakata, the composer and musician, is that much of what he is likely to gain as royalties is lost to piracy. It seems that he, and other protest musicians, have sacrificed their careers. In an interview with Freemuse, Zhakata (2005) says: “I sing for Zimbabweans, and rightly so I sing in my native Shona language. I do not sing in English, and in singing my native language I endeavour to be as elaborate as possible in my messages”. Zhakata’s target is people who understand the Shona language; Shona lyrics ensure his own expressive eloquence. He posits that “my music remains provocative and creates debate among the Zimbabwean society”, and says “I have a duty to serve my people […] sing about man’s injustices to another […] rebuke those who manipulate others by virtue of being in powerful and authoritative positions” (ibid.). Zhakata’s exclusive Freemuse interview indicates that local media have not afforded him space but are biased towards the current regime. He is nevertheless optimistic that one day his music will receive deserved recognition:
“The next time, I will be talking about my once-banned music receiving airplay on radio and television. Like the great reggae star Bob Marley sang: ‘Time alone will tell’” (ibid.). Sibanda (2008) cites Zhakata: “The people of Zimbabwe deserve better [...] as musicians we are encouraging them to fight on as there is light at the end of the tunnel. As artists we have no power to stop [...] violence but through songs we have been advising people against this”. Zhakata emphasizes: “Music has become my weapon, it is my contribution to the struggle of Zimbabwe” (ibid.).

“O Zimbabwe!” (Self-published 2008) is a consciousness-raising rather than a political song, written, performed and recorded at the end of 2008, in Australia, by Australian musicians, to protest the situation seen on television and heard on radio. Diana Blom, the songwriter of “O Zimbabwe!”, had attended a music conference in Harare in 1998 and despite having been warned to be careful, found Harare a modern, thriving city. Its breakdown in infrastructure, resulting in news that cholera had become a major health threat, triggered the song. Neither the song style, with its triple-time gospel feel, nor the instrumentation, try to be “Zimbabwean”. Instead the style is that of Americans taken from Africa as slaves: in “O Zimbabwe!” it is turned around to serve a part of Africa not associated with US slavery. The words, plus the lilt of triple time, a metre often encountered in US and European protest songs, and the gospel feel, give the song the quality of a lament, relating to DuBois’s (cited in Eyerman and Jamison 1998, p. 74) notion of “sorrow songs”, his term for spirituals. Through both metaphorical and direct language, the words aim to educate the listener yet try to capture the listener’s creative ear as well.

Distribution of “O Zimbabwe!” has proved difficult. Australian radio stations have not shown interest and so, as academics, we have chosen to discuss protest songs at conferences. This has provided the outlet for some singing of the song by music educators around the world interested in protest music. Aiming to “send the song around the world and sing the song around the world”, a website was established (MySpace 2008) with the song’s score and lyrics, plus an MP3 file of the recording. The one track CDs, containing the song, information about the website and an email contact address, have been widely distributed. People are encouraged to sing the 3’12” song everywhere and play the recording. While moving slowly, “O Zimbabwe!” is spreading its message and the message remains current.

**CONCLUSION**

Strong reasons remain for finding ways to be heard in the context of a response to the Zimbabwean situation. Both songs have “intention” (Street 2006) in relation to political issues and because of this, it will take longer for Zhakata to receive his rightful royalties and for the Australian song to be broadcast. Meanwhile the songs, through piracy and less orthodox channels, plus discussion at conferences, are an important voice for the suffering, because, as the warning on a Movement for Democratic Change (2009) pamphlet with DVD containing strong images and text of the crisis in Zimbabwe human rights, states: “Your silence can seriously damage someone’s health”.
ENDNOTES

1. The most popular, best-selling genre is sungura, a fast paced musical style resulting from the fusion of benga, rumba and the traditional musical genres of Zimbabwe, largely because of its appeal in both rural and urban areas. Contemporary mbira, music fused with western musical instruments or simulation of mbira on western instruments, is also popular among rural and urban, young and old, and the modern Christian church movement. Urban grooves, a category of music that is computer or software generated and characterized by loud levels of sound, is very popular among urban youths with a focus on protesting over social levels rather than political issues.

REFERENCES


