The Afrikaans folk song brand

DANIELA HEUNIS
RHODES UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT
The Afrikaans popular music industry is regarded as one of the most financially lucrative South African music industries. One of the sources for creating and recreating Afrikaans popular hit songs has been the Afrikaans folksong genre. Since 1930 this genre has frequently resurfaced as the basis of hit songs. This paper will highlight the role of the Afrikaans folk song genre in popular music during the past eighty years focusing specifically on the South African born musician Joseph Marais who built his brand around this genre.

KEYWORDS: Afrikaans folk song; hits; Josef Marais.

INTRODUCTION
In this paper the theories of Martin Kornberger (2010), who recognises the brand as media and the brand as signs, as well as those of Martin Lindstrom (2005), who explains how to build powerful brands through strong connection with the senses, have been used to identify the Afrikaans folk song brand.

Singers of Afrikaans folk songs active during the past eighty-one years of South African music recordings were researched to find suitable examples that could be labelled as a brand. In order for the folk song to be labelled as a brand, a collection of songs sung either by one artist or a group of musicians had to be identified that could initiate a specific sense of place or identity. Some of these songs were then analysed using the theories of Kornberger and Lindstrom. Josef Marais’ oeuvre was identified as currently the sole carrier of the brand.

To legitimately be called a folk song, a song “had to circulate among the folk” (Cohen 2002, p. 89) and thus be sung widely. They are the hit songs of yester-
year that have stood the test of time through selection, continuity and variation (McLachlan 1978, p. 37). Folk song melodies are frequently used to recreate songs, often resulting in new hit songs. As remarked by an Afrikaner businessman in a conversation with Helen Kivnick (1990, p. 326), folk songs served for mass singing and bonded groups together. In this paper, the definition used of the folk song genre is broadly categorised as songs whose composers were mostly unknown but were popular with and widely sung by Afrikaans-speaking people.

**THE BRANDS PERSPECTIVE**

Martin Kornberger (2010, p. 48) writes:

> Brands are not one thing but many. The truth is a function of the perspective one chooses to take. [...] Instead of thinking of a brand as an object, we can also conceptualize it as the result of a set of practices.

Kornberger (2010, p. 30) acknowledges the difficulty in agreeing on one definition for the notion of “brand” and identifies the following four possible categories: “Brands as [a] management tool”; “Brands as [a] corporate catalyst”; “Brands as signs”; and “Brands as media”. The latter two categories are the most appropriate when considering a definition of the folk song brand. The concept of the brand as a sign represents brands as experience and lifestyle, thus taking on a social life and becoming markers of identity. The commodity transforms into a brand using advertising, packaging and design. Brands become mental constructs that evoke different meanings, and, as they influence the social and cultural fabric of our world, are powerful. Brands as media rely on the emotional connection between people and commodities, thereby adding values and meaning when linking society, organisations and individuals.

Lindstrom (2005) argues that the senses activate memory, which evokes an emotional response to a brand. A higher combination of senses triggered will increase the active number of sensory memories, thereby mobilising a stronger connection between the brand and the consumer. It is therefore beneficial for the brand if more historical ties and associations can be included, thereby strengthening it.

**THE FOLK SONG BRAND OF JOSEF MARAIS AS A MEDIUM**

The South African-born Joseph Pessach immigrated to the United States in 1939. When Josef Marais changed his name is uncertain. His successful folk song brand was built around “a unique style of singing, a fresh and stimulating body of material [...] and an engaging personality that registers convincingly” (Marais 1949a). Each of these characteristics focuses on the brand as the medium linking the individual with society.

Marais used his unique singing style together with his accomplished guitar expertise to create a new life for himself in America. Whether he had any formal training
as a singer or guitarist could not be ascertained, but Lawless (1960, p. 155) remarks: “Besides being an accomplished violinist, Marais is a fine classical guitarist, and his special arrangements for folksongs [sic] are themselves works of art”. *Time* (1978) describes the “rhythmic calypso-style Afrikaner folk songs […] as a sort of bushveld hillbilly” and (1953): “[A]ll of [his songs] come from memories of the songs he heard as a youngster in the Cape Colony”.

The upsurge in public interest and the universal appeal of folk songs were two of the main reasons that steered Marais to recognise the commercial potential of the Afrikaans folk song genre. Sharing his culture with his newly adopted country’s audience resulted in him building a career as a balladeer. In a letter addressed to Frits Stegmann, Marais (1949b) comments that he

> had never given much serious thought to folk songs. You ask how the Afrikaans liedjies ['little songs'] have become so popular. I think the main reason is the upsurge in public interest in the United States especially, in folksongs [sic].

Cohen (2002) confirms the explosion of folk music, particularly in New York, after the Second World War.

In a newspaper report Josef Marais and his wife Miranda are reported as being “initiates to their particular brand” (*Unknown newspaper* 1947). At the heart of this brand was initially only the performance of translated Afrikaans folk songs for English audiences. Gradually, the repertoire expanded to include adaptations and translations of folk songs of Dutch, Flemish, German and French origin. Marais’ translation of folk songs from Afrikaans into English is recognised by Stambler (1969, pp. 193-194) for its “folk music scholarship”, while McNamara (1952, p. 335) describes Marais as “a pioneer in the translation into English of Afrikaans and other folk songs”. Thus the brand extended to include a variety of cultures shared with the audience:

> We believe that our arrangements should be in the spirit of the original, and yet bear the ‘art’ imprint: we consider our function to be that of the minstrel who tries to show the inherent value of a song as layman, and thus we further the cause of folk-singing, by encouraging the ‘folk’ to sing more songs, and fresh tunes. (Marais, cited in Lawless 1960, p. 155)

Marais’ engaging personality fully utilised the media as a brand medium. He broadcasted nationally and internationally on radio from 1939 to 1943 with the shows *Music of Josef Marais* on the local New York City station WOR and *African trek* on NBC Blue Network. The latter was broadcasted to Africa on shortwave from 1941. The show included South African songs, African folklore and stories and was performed with his three-man group the Bushveld Band. “Sarie Marais” (*Time* 1941), the signature tune for his program, was ingeniously chosen to reinforce his own adopted surname. This trend continued in his concert career, in which he used it as the introductory song. The popularity of his brand is indicated in the song “Sarie
Marais” becoming directly associated with him – the “Famous Signature Song of Josef Marais Radio Program” – as noted in the Archive of the British Library (Kresa circa 1944).

For a brand to expand, it needs to gain popularity systematically. Marais shared his South African background with the audience in an easily understandable way that made him accessible and popular with not only the general public but also influential people such as the South African Union Consul, the President of the USA, Harry Truman (Stegmann 1957, p. 2) and contemporary artists. His significant popularity was indicated in the vast amount of fan mail he received. He therefore touched and connected with his audience (consumers) on different levels. *Time* (1941) reports:

> The occasion being Marais’s [sic] 100th broadcast. [...] Marais fans, invited to attend, came in such numbers that NBC had to put on the show in its new, copper-lined theater. The Consul of the Union of South Africa came and testified that the ‘liedjies’ (‘little songs’) of Josef Marais brought back to him the ‘breath of the veld’ (‘vegetation’).

*Time* (1953) further remarks:

> For the past dozen years a South African balladeer named Josef Marais has been quietly building a reputation as a specialist in folk and children’s songs [...]. His songs of the veld (‘vegetation’), such as ‘Sugarbush’, ‘Ay-round the corner’ and the fast-rising ‘Ma says, pa says’, have been recorded by such big-league songbirds as Jo Stafford and Doris Day.


According to the archive of the *Dispatch* (1952, p. 31):

> The South African Afrikaans song ‘Suikerbossie’, sung in an English version entitled ‘Sugarbush’ by Eve Boswell, is a top hit tune in Britain today. People are whistling it in the streets. The BBC hardly lets a day go by without broadcasting [...] ‘Sugarbush’, presently number two favourite on the television show *Hit Parade*. 
THE FOLK SONG BRAND OF JOSEF MARAIS AS A SIGN

Marais’ brand further relates to Kornberger’s (2010, p. 30) concept of the brand as a sign. In implementing typical South African language, Marais pitched his brand geographically. Kornberger (ibid., pp. 41-42) comments:

A brand is something that emerges from a commodity by adding associations. […] A product has no identity; a brand does. It garners an identity through its name, its association with cultural meanings, […] and other strategies designed to give it what can be called ‘cultural relevance’.

Marais’ titles (The African trek, Songs from the veld, The Bushveld Band and Bosvelder) illustrate how cultural meaning was added to his folk song brand. Growing up on an African farm and becoming an inhabitant of a city would have influenced his selection of language. The title of his radio series The African trek acknowledged the program as being from Africa and as having African content. The meaning of the Afrikaans word “trek” is “people that travel / move with their belongings” (Van Wyk 2003, p. 499). Marais could have derived the title from the Great Trek, which took place when the Afrikaners travelled by ox wagon from the coastal Cape Province into the interior of the country in 1838. The centenary celebrations of 1938 were fresh in the memory because it was one year prior to Marais starting his popular series on National Broadcasting Company Radio in New York. Furthermore, it could have the additional meaning that he (the African) migrated (trekked) to America.

The title of his first album was Songs from the veld. Here the word “veld” could indicate that the songs originated from the picnic songs that were originally sung outdoors when enjoying a picnic. Ten of the Afrikaans songs that Marais included in his repertoire were published as lyrics and melody by Boshoff and du Plessis in 1918 as “Piekniekliedjies” (“picnic songs”), and sixteen as lyrics in the chapter on Die pieniekdans en pieknieklied (“The picnic dance and the picnic song”) of S.J. Du Toit (1924). Boshoff and du Plessis (1918, p. 18) explain that the South African picnic is specifically for guests from town and not for the farmer. He observed that the popularity of the picnic as entertainment in South Africa is a direct result of the pleasant climate and added: “Ons is self, als Afrikaners, kinders van die veld” (“we as Afrikaners are children of the outdoors”).

THE FOLK SONG BRAND OF JOSEF MARAIS STIMULATING THE SENSES

Music, and especially vocal music such as folk songs one grew up with, has the ability to recall values, feelings and emotions stored in the memory created through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. The cultural relevance identified in Kornberger’s “brand as a sign” further highlights this strong association with and stimulation of the senses exposed by the folk song brand. According to Martin Lindstrom (2005, p. 10):
We store our values, feelings, and emotions in memory banks. Compare that memory to the standard video recorder which records on two separate tracks – one for image, one for sound. The human being has at least five tracks – image, sound, smell, taste and touch. These five tracks contain more data than one can imagine because they have direct bearing on our emotions and all that they entail. They can fast forward or backtrack at will, and stop just exactly on the right spot in a split second.

Experiencing a song in a specific environment can recreate the environment’s smells, tastes and the sense of touch instantly, as well as bringing back memories of visual places and other aural memories. The folk song “O brandewyn laat my staan” (“Oh brandy leave me alone”) could recall both positive and negative memories on different levels of sensory stimulation. The aural and visual senses are the two obvious senses that would be stimulated in the music listener. Music is primarily an aural medium but attending concerts or listening to the words of a song would also stimulate the visual sense. The following two quotations indicate Marais’ success in stimulating both the smell and tactile senses in his listeners.

In 1941 the Consul of the Union of South Africa stated that the translated songs of Josef Marais evoked the “breath of the ‘veld’ to him” (Time 1941). Here the brand stimulated the smell sense of the listener by recalling the fresh smell of the African outdoor environment, which could have ranged from heather to cow’s dung, depending on the listener’s memory: “One homesick South African informed [Marais] that he changed to hunting boots and shorts for every Marais broadcast” (Time 1941). This quotation provides an example of how the folk songs played by Marais strongly activated this listener’s tactile memory in creating such a longing emotion that he had to wear the clothes that reminded him of his home country. Hunting boots especially can further activate the smell sense of being back on African soil.

Different kinds of sensory stimulation enable the consumer to choose between similar products. The senses are embedded in our long-term memory and are part of our decision-making processes (Lindstrom 2005). Lawless (1960, p. 155) quotes Josef Marais: “Our greatest joy is to hear community singing of the songs we originated, or translated, or first planted as seeds in the hearts of the amateurs”. Obviously, it would give Marais great pleasure and be financially beneficial when the audience used his products, because the more products that are consumed would mean more money in his pocket from concert performances and the sale of records, song sheets and books.

CONCLUSION

Since 1930 the Afrikaans folk song genre has frequently been used as the inspiration for hit songs in popular music. This paper has argued that the folk song genre can activate all five sensory memory banks: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. It has identified the oeuvre of translated Afrikaans folk songs of Josef Marais as the sole
carrier of the Afrikaans folk song brand, and has indicated how this brand could function both as a medium and as a sign.

ENDNOTES
1. The South African music recording industry was established in 1931, when Eric Gallo imported the necessary equipment. Artists therefore no longer travelled abroad to be recorded (Pretorius 1998, p. 60).
2. *The African Trek* was the title of Marais’ NBC (National Broadcasting Company) radio series, that broadcasted weekly from 1939 to 1943 from New York. *Songs of the South African veld* was the title of Marais’ first Afrikaans folk song album of 1941 (78 rpm record), which was published in 1942 as the song compilation *Songs from the veld* (Marais 1941 and 1942). Both *The Bushveld Band* and *Bosvelder* were titles Marais used for musical groups/bands which he established.

REFERENCES
Marais, Josef. 1949b. Personal letter to Frits Stegmann, 14 June.


