Township comets: The impact of South African jazz on the UK scene

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ABSTRACT
That South African jazz musicians have been heavily influenced by musicians from the United States is both understandable and well understood. Various scholars including Coplan (2007), Ansell (2004), Martin (1999), Ballantine (1993), and Erlman (1991), have traced the early history of this influence to visits by minstrel troupes and jubilee singers in the late nineteenth century. Ballantine (1993) informs us that in the mid twentieth century the influence continued to be important and, on occasion, it was made overt by groups with names such as the African Inkspots and the Manhattan Brothers doing superb imitations of the Inkspots and the Mills Brothers. Indeed artists continued to acknowledge their influences throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century; Chris McGregor’s “Sweet As Honey” (MUSEA 1988) was dedicated to Thelonious Monk and featured a typically Monk-esque harmonic sequence, whilst Winston Mankunku Ngozi’s admiration for John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter can be found in more than just the title of “Dedication (To Daddy Trane and Brother Shorter)” (WRC 1968; Sheer Sound 2003). But as more and more South African jazz artists sought refuge from the brutal politics at home they travelled and practiced their music overseas, notably in the United Kingdom (Abrahams, Africa, Bahula, Deppa, Dyani, Feza, Jolobe, Lipere, Matthews, McGregor, Mahlolo, Miller, Moholo-Moholo, Mothle, Mseleku, Pukwana, Ranku, Saul and Williams, amongst others). Drawing on personal interviews and recorded music, this paper presents preliminary findings from research that seeks to identify the various areas in which exiled South African musicians influenced UK musicians and their music.

KEYWORDS: jazz; United Kingdom; South Africa; diaspora; exile.
The “how” and “where” of musical influence

Two fundamental questions of a project such as this are how and where one chooses to look for “influence”. Additionally there is the ever fascinating gap between what practitioners say they do and what they can be observed as doing (I’d like to emphasize the formulation “what musicians can be observed as doing” as opposed to “what musicians do” since I’d suggest that a very profound influence can manifest itself in ways that are difficult to pinpoint objectively).

Regarding “how” I’ve looked for influence, my observations are based on studying recordings (commercially available, broadcast, and private), conversations with musicians, and a rather unsystematic approach to attending live performances. However I’d like to note here a point well made by Louis Moholo-Moholo (2010): “Just because it’s not on record, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen”.

For the “where”, that is the places in which I’ve looked for this influence, my research has coalesced around eight rather fluid groupings:

1. Extra-musical (titles, lyrics, dedications, and artwork);
2. Personnel/collaborators;
3. Repertoire;
4. Musical (organisation, pastiche, instrumentation, techniques, groove/feel, harmony, melodic line, phrasing, sound);
5. Pluralism (free music, approach to the US tradition, inclusion of folk/world elements);
6. Performative elements;
7. Education;
8. “Hidden” Influence.

Despite ordering these elements numerically I don’t wish to imply a hierarchy of importance, nor categorical independence. As I understand it, these elements interact and inform each other freely, and are only ordered thus to facilitate a linear narrative.

The extra-musical

Considering the extra-musical can be an exercise in spotting philosophical alignment, rather than tangible musical influences. Steve Williamson’s *Rhyme time*:That fuss was us! (*Verve* 1991) is dedicated to Art Blakey and Chris McGregor jointly, both of whom had died the previous year. Although Williamson featured in one of the later Brotherhood of Breath line-ups, and despite citing the Brotherhood as a formative experience – especially with regard to time, feel, and groove (Williamson 2009) – the musical language of *Rhyme time* is most closely aligned to that of Steve Coleman’s M-Base collective.

British trombonist Annie Whitehead was a member of the Brotherhood at the same time as Williamson but also played in small groups with Pukwana, an influence she acknowledges in “To Dudu” (MSI 2004). However Duncan Heining (2008-09, p. 43) states that in Whitehead’s music he hears a clear debt to the “spirit of the Blue Notes”.

But perhaps the most intricate extra-musical example can be seen in the artwork for UK big band Loose Tubes’ second and third albums (Loose Tubes Limited 1986; Editions EG 1988). In many ways the group of musicians who formed Loose Tubes with Django Bates represent the pool of UK musicians who were most obviously musically influenced by the South African exiles. Consequently, rather than implying that the influence was limited to album artwork, I would suggest that it is more appropriate to consider it as pervading many areas including the artwork.

The design for both albums is credited to Giant, and although there is nothing especially definite on the front cover of Delightful Precipice (Loose Tubes Limited 1986), the back of the LP features a British colonial map of the Union of South Africa with flames lapping up its right hand side, thereby inviting the listener to consider the message behind the first track on the album “Sąd Afrika” (part of the manuscript for which also appears below the burning map). It is interesting also to note the particular spelling, and the play on a perceived stereotypical white South African accent, which was heavily satirised in the UK media at the time largely as a result of the efforts of Spitting Image Productions (1986).

**PERSONNEL/COLLABORATORS**

The inclusion of Thebe Lipere on Loose Tubes’ third album (Editions EG 1988) was by no means a unique instance of SA-UK collaboration. In the early 1960s the musical King Kong and the Blue Notes’ arrival had done much to establish the South African jazz community in London (McGregor 1995, p. 87). This was a tremendous fillip for a younger generation of British musicians who did not fit in to any of the three prevailing jazz orthodoxies which, at the time, comprised of two reactionary factions – the revivalists and traditionalists – and the bop modernists (McKay 2005).

One of the early British musicians to record with exiled South Africans was drummer Laurie Allen, who appeared on Gwigwi Mrwebi’s 1967 recording Kwela (77 Records 1967) – later reissued under the title Mbaqanga Songs (Honest Jon’s Records 2006). The same year also saw the first of Chris McGregor’s European big bands – which eventually performed and recorded under the name the Brotherhood of Breath – and always featured a combination of nationalities. The backbone of the Brotherhood was a balance of South African and British players and their early experiments were facilitated by Ronnie Scott’s club relocating to Frith Street and making the Gerard Street premises – which became known as The Old Place – available to younger musicians until the lease expired. But this environment of musical mixing should not be written off simply as opportunist pragmatics. McGregor told Jean-Pierre Cosse in 1972 that:
There were quite a lot of jam-sessions amongst all the young, less well-known musicians playing at the club. We all wanted to research what the others were into, and this created lines of connection between musicians of different groups. (Cited in McGregor 1995, p. 107)

Trumpeter and composer Kenny Wheeler (2011) confirmed the value of this situation:

London was a great place when [the South Africans] were around. [...] In those days musicians were moving around. One day you might be in a Mike Westbrook thing, or a Mike Gibbs thing, or a Brotherhood of Breath thing. There was a lot of changing going on. That was a good time really.

British musicians involved in these lines of connection included Malcolm Griffiths, Pat Higgs, Dave Holdsworth, Dave Holland, Alan Jackson, Mike Osbourne, Evan Parker, Alan Skidmore, and John Surman (McGregor 1995, p. 109), and in the late 1980s the next generation joined in, including Steve Williamson, Julian Argüelles, Dave DeFries, Annie Whitehead, Chris Biscoe and Fayaz Virji.

A number of other bands who contributed to and continued this legacy of transnational collaboration included District Six, Fast Colour, Centipede, Zila, Viva La Black, The Dedication Orchestra and the recently formed Township Comets where South Africans Pinise Saul and Adam Glasser play Dudu Pukwana repertoire with Chris Batchelor, Jason Yarde, Harry Brown, Gene Caldarazzo and Dudley Phillips.

**Musical**

With regard to observable musical influence on British musicians I have identified nine areas of interest:

1. Musical organisation;
2. Tribute pastiche/re-composition;
3. Instrumentation;
4. Compositional techniques;
5. Groove/feel;
6. Harmony;
7. Melodic line;
8. Phrasing;

For this paper I’ll restrict my thoughts to the first three in this list.
MUSICAL ORGANISATION

As a seventeen-year-old musician listening to UK modernists Don Weller and Stan Tracey, trumpeter Chris Batchelor recalls being totally overwhelmed by the way the South African exiles approached the music (especially Dudu Pukwana and Mongezi Feza). His first exposure to their music was at an illegal club in London’s Rotherhithe where Pukwana was beginning to experiment with an expanded line up for his band Zila. South African regulars Pinise Saul (voice), Ernest Mothle (bass), Churchill Jolobe (drums) and Dudu Pukwana (saxophone) were joined by another South African Peter Tholo Segona (trumpet), Barbadian trumpeter Harry Beckett and Englishman Dave DeFries, also on trumpet. Batchelor (2011) recalls that “people would blow at the same time, it wasn’t precious, it wasn’t like my solo, your solo… They’d just dive in”.

If this sense was never really captured by the larger format British arrangements commissioned for Moholo-Moholo’s The Dedication Orchestra (Ogun 1994; Ogun 1992), it was a way forward that inspired Keith Tippett’s music – not just with regard to organising improvisations but also the way that separate compositions could be combined in performance. Writing in 2008 for the liner notes to Ogun’s Blue Notes box set Tippett acknowledges the impact the South African’s music had on him:

I first heard the Blue Notes at Ronnie Scott’s Old Place… I heard Chris, Dudu, Mongezi, Ronnie (Beer), Johnny and Louis. Forty-odd years later, the memory of that incredible gig is still vibrant. The pieces, the improvisation, the way they swung, the freedom of it all was quite unlike anything I had heard before. (Tippett 2008)

TRIBUTE PASTICHE/RE-COMPOSITION

British jazz musicians have made a number of musical tributes to the various South African musics that the exiled jazz musicians drew upon for their own inspiration and thereby introduced to the UK jazz world. Django Bates’ and Steve Argüelles’ Human Chain album (Loose Tubes Limited 1986) is especially illuminating in this regard. The track “Jolobe” is, unsurprisingly, a tribute to drummer Churchill Jolobe and features a keyboard introduction and general demeanour that is maskanda through a Batesian lens. And from the same album it is difficult not to hear the vocal style and malombo drums of Philip Tabane’s groups refracted in the “La La La”.

Perhaps the most involved pastiche/tribute however is DeFries’ “Open Letter To Dudu Pukwana” written for Loose Tubes. (Editions EG 1988) Here the well-known “MRA” by Dudu Pukwana (and/or Christopher Columbus Ngcukana) is given a new twist. Amongst many musical references, the distinctive arpeggiated riff set up by the trombones in Chris McGregor’s Brotherhood arrangement (Neon RCA 1971) is mutated into DeFries’ trombone riff where the last 4/4 bar of the four bar pattern is extended to become a 6/4 bar.
INSTRUMENTATION

Before the Brotherhood of Breath hurled itself on to the London jazz scene, the conception of what a big band could be was rather limited to “old fashioned swing or hideous fusion” where the idea was “clean, accurate intonation and time” (Batchelor 2011). Django Bates’ notoriously eclectic record collection (partly informed by his father’s listening habits) featured Brotherhood recordings however and these were crucial in forming his understanding of how a big band could be (Mixing it 1999). We can observe this in the non-conventional big band line-up employed by Loose Tubes – McGregor had of course written and arranged for large ensemble line-ups that included bassoon, alto clarinet, flute, and violin on Yes please (In & Out 1981).

But there are other instrumentation usages that speak directly to South African popular music. Saxophonist/clarinettist Steve Buckley – a member of Loose Tubes and later collaborator with Chris Batchelor in the group Big Air – was heavily influenced by kwela pennywhistle style and this was worked in to a variety of contexts including the big band sound of Loose Tubes Limited (1986; Editions EG 1988), the electronica influenced improvisations of Big Air (Babel 2008), Django Bates’ theatre music for a production of The third policeman (Ah Um 1990) as well as Buckley’s own projects, notably the albums Life as we know It (Babel 1997-8) and Bud moon with Noble and Marshall (Ping Pong Productions 1996).

FINAL REMARKS

It is important to acknowledge that, as in South Africa, the US also heavily influenced the UK jazz scene. The contribution made to the UK jazz scene by musicians from other African countries – especially Nigeria, the Congo, and Senegal – is also noteworthy.

There are obvious problems with implying that the musical transactions I have discussed were one way, but possible reasons the impact of South African musicians was so great in the UK are a matter of numbers combined with length of stay. Other conditions, such as an openness to and interest in folk musics from around the world amongst younger UK jazz musicians, also provided fertile ground for the particular combination of musics practised by the South African exiles.

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ENDNOTES

1. Both Pukwana and Ngcukana have laid claim to this composition and as such it is
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extremely difficult to ascertain a definitive single authorship, if such a concept is even appropriate.

REFERENCES


Williamson, Steve. 1991. Rhyme time: That fuss was us!. Verve, United Kingdom. Phonogram.