

Apartheid Swing

The Jazz Epistles' Short-Lived Success



Pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, a.k.a. Dollar Brand, before he left South Africa, 1959

A “popular, sex-stimulating music” that gratifies “the baser impulses” and “penetrates the soul quicker than more advanced forms.” That was jazz in 1955, at least as described by Dr. Yvonne Huskisson, one of the main gatekeepers of culture in apartheid-era South Africa. She didn't mean it as a good thing. For a government intent on repressing black unity to preserve white minority rule, any music with such a capacity to rouse—particularly one that symbolized racial integration—was considered a threat. Apartheid meant “separateness,” and it was only four years later, in 1959, that the government would begin forcibly segregating black South Africans by ethnic group, relocating them to the townships or to one of 10 different Bantustans, or “homelands,” far from their actual homes. Encourage allegiance to tribe and not nation, the thinking went, and dissent could be minimized. Jazz was out; the indigenous music of the tribes, disseminated by state-controlled radio stations, was in.

Yet there were the Jazz Epistles, breaking attendance records in Cape Town and Sophiatown, playing to mixed audiences, and making them swoon. Composed of Abdullah Ibrahim a.k.a. Dollar Brand (piano), Hugh Masekela (trumpet), Kippie Moeketsi (alto saxophone), Jonas Gwangwa (trombone), Johnny Gertze (bass), Early Mabuza (drums), and Makaya Ntshoko (drums), the group had formed as an offshoot of two other pioneering all-black South African groups that had somehow managed to thrive: the popular vocal outfit Manhattan Brothers, which featured a young Miriam Makeba, and the pit band for the jazz musical *King Kong*, about the life of boxer Ezekiel Dlamini.

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But it was with the bebop-minded Jazz Epistles that seven musicians obsessed with Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington could truly come into their own. For their first gigs at the Ambassador nightclub, in a suburb of Cape Town, they practiced nine hours a day and slept on the floor. They were so well rehearsed that when they recorded their first and only album—*Jazz Epistle: Verse 1*, the first all-black modern jazz record in South African history—it took only two hours to finish. The work paid off. Soon enough, they were playing seven nights a week to a room so packed the musicians could barely get to the stage. Only music—no food or alcohol—was served. And yet reservations still had to be made four days in advance.

Success was short lived. By 1959, spurred by growing nation-wide protests against the Pass Laws, which limited the time blacks

could spend in white areas while requiring them to carry all manner of identification, the police crackdown had spread. On March 21, 1960, in what would come to be known as the Sharpeville Massacre, police opened fire on a group of 5,000 people engaged in civil disobedience, killing 69 and wounding 180. Tanks entered the townships. Surveillance, banishments, and house arrests became routine. What few jobs there were for black musicians disappeared.

At the time of the massacre, the Jazz Epistles were preparing for a national tour at Dorkay House, the invaluable multi-use black arts center in Johannesburg, where Nelson and Winnie Mandela supposedly met. But after the government declared a state of emergency, the tour was cancelled. That would be it for the band. Just weeks later, trumpet player Hugh Masekela was on a plane to London, having miraculously secured a passport before what would have likely been his own arrest. To calm his nerves on the plane, he ordered a triple scotch on the rocks, light on the soda, because that's what Humphrey Bogart drank. “I thought the cops would burst in any minute and remove me,” he recalled. “It was only when we were in the air and beyond South Africa's border that I started to relax and enjoy my first flight and... taste of freedom.”

Abdullah Ibrahim fled South Africa two years later, the year Mandela was arrested. His destination was Zürich, where he would see snow for the first time and where bandmates Ntshoko and Gertze also sought exile. The trio reunited at Club Africana, where they kept the Epistles flame alive for two years. Duke Ellington, who was an A&R man at the time, stopped by the club one night at the urging of Ibrahim's wife, Sathima. “You're blessed because you come from the source,” he told Ibrahim. A recording session was soon scheduled in Paris, which would result in the album *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*. For so long, Ellington and jazz had symbolized freedom for Ibrahim, particularly during the darker days of apartheid. That they were now collaborators could only be a sign of better days to come.



Alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, trombonist Jonas Gwangwa, and trumpeter Hugh Masekela performing together, 1959



A teenage Hugh Masekela admires the shine of his trumpet, 1956