

Will the new Miriam Makeba please stand up

April 14, 2014 — Music as a form of political and social protest was common in South Africa throughout the apartheid years, but as we mark our 20th Anniversary of Freedom and Democracy, pop music seems preoccupied by everything but politics. Conventional success too distracting?



The legend Miriam Makeba aka Mama Africa during one of her performances

As South Africa begins worldwide celebrations to mark its [20th Anniversary of Freedom and Democracy](#), it's hard not to notice that the musical voice of freedom has become rather muted.

The icons

Leading cultural icons such as world-renowned trumpeter, Hugh Masekela, piano maestro Abdullah Ibrahim, sizzling songwriter Caiphus Semenya and political trombonist Jonas Gwangwa are alive but relatively quiet. In the dusk of their lives they seem to have retreated from using culture or music as a weapon of the struggle to articulate the aspirations of the people for human rights and decent life.

In a gesture of self-censorship that sees more artists depending on government gigs to sustain their flashy lifestyles, artists are finding that they cannot bite the hand that feeds them. The concept of freedom of expression becomes a luxury when you weigh it against the exorbitant fees you can charge for appearances on government-sponsored platforms.

In fact, celebrated African vocalist Letta Mbulu was possibly the last important singer whose music was blatantly laden with politically conscious lyrics. It was her album title track *Not Yet Uhuru* – released in the early 1990s – that pitted her against the prevalent political negotiations and the soon-to-be new governing classes. Mbulu – just like Miriam Makeba and Busi Mhlongo, to name a few – was forced into exile in the 1960s and became part of the struggle. As a young woman, she was nurtured with the vision and aspirations of a better quality of life for what she considered her people.

Letta Mbulu- Amakhamandela (Not yet Uhuru)

YouTube



Letta Mbulu- Amakhamandela (Not yet Uhuru)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1Js95topeKI

It is interesting to note that almost 20 years after the return of exiles like Mbulu, Mhlongo and the late Makeba, there is not a single young, female South African singer of equal significance promoted by the mainstream or independents to follow the route of using music to raise political consciousness.

Admittedly, this is a difficult route, one that is typically only travelled by artists who are not only intuitively connected to the people but are willing to assert self-determination, uniqueness of individuality and total freedom.

The new generation

So far, almost none of the new generation of female South African singers has done anything that slightly resembles what Mbulu or Makeba did. None in our post-apartheid society who truly represents the voice of the people, if you will. This is but one indication of how this generation of singers has been removed from identifying with and belonging to the working poor and under class. It was the 1956 Women's Anti-Pass March that sent the Afrikaner prime minister, Strijdom, scurrying from the wrath of women, but where is that fearlessness and resilience in music today? Aside from hip hop, where you find a few (but fewer than you'd imagine) politically-conscious acts like [Burni Aman](#) (one of the artists taking part in the [Under Madiba Skies](#) project celebrating 20 years of Freedom), Tumi and Ben Sharpa – and the last two are guys, clearly – the activism that fired Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Ray Alexander, Lilian Ngoyi, Albertinah Sisulu, Helen Suzman and even Sarah Baartman is missing from the music of South Africa's female pop artists.

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Instead, our singers appear to represent and reflect middle class musical ethos, superficial cultural consciousness and pop-psychology in their lyrical content. The only tinge of semi-political awareness has perhaps been from Simpiwe Dana and Thandiswa Mazwai.

In some of their not so successful tracks, *Bantu Biko Street* and [Ngimkhonzile](#), respectively, they have briefly dabbled with politically sensitive subject matter.



Simphiwe Dana - Bantu Biko Street

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gMhV1qnn2w0

But nothing as powerful nor as vividly memorable as Mhlongo's [*Babhemu*](#), Makeba's [*West Winds*](#) or Mbulu's *Not Yet Uhuru*, for instance. Our social and political problems did not vanish with the end of apartheid – our huge [gaps in wealth](#) and [income](#) alone must surely provide food for thought for our singers, at least occasionally – so where is the music grounded in the lives and aspirations of the people?

Even with highly respected older singers like Busi Mhlongo and Yvonne Chaka Chaka, we see how easily the desire for commercial success extinguishes the flame of political consciousness.

And in their wake comes one singer after the other chasing after Afropop gold without an apparent care for the lived experiences of the politically and economically disenfranchised. This appears to be not only a symptom of a preoccupation with money, conventional success and middle class prestige,

but also a defence mechanism against provincialism, a desire to project a cultural consciousness or lyrical experience that is rooted in a false urban African culture.

Reflecting the soul of the nation

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The frictionless music of acts like [Mafikizolo](#) has apparently become a prerequisite for a recording deal, and mandatory for any singer who wishes to make a musical statement that conforms to what we now accept the “authentic African vibe”.

Perhaps our singers fear rejection by an overly Americanised music industry, one that has them preoccupied with selling music overseas rather than here at home. One highly gifted victim of this duplicity is the award winning Lira, whose music been widely embraced by soul starved audiences looking for something “urban” to hold on to, but in which people at the wrong end of the wealth gap will find nothing that could feature on the soundtrack to their protests.

The music-funding South African public isn’t helping matters, as we appear to be hungry for music that is only remotely rooted in African sounds, languages and style.

There is no pressure from the government or political quarters for our singers to toe any political line. In fact, freedom of cultural expression is not only enshrined in the constitution but also promoted through funding or support.

Our current generation of singers can still play their part as custodians of our culture, politics and heritage, follow in the footsteps of Lillian Ngoyi et al and lead any efforts to reflect the soul of the nation. But they can only do that by being true to themselves and listening to what stirs in their own souls when they take a clear-sighted look at the “Rainbow Nation”.

Not everyone can be politically engaged, but just a few will do. Just one, even. So will the new Miriam Makeba please stand up?

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