



## **TRADE UNIONS AND CULTURAL WORKERS**

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT TENDENCY TO SEPARATE ARTISTIC ACTIVITY FROM INDUSTRIAL WORK. A SLIGHTLY UPDATED VERSION OF THE ARTICLE WHICH MADE ITS APPEARANCE IN "DAWN" IN 1981 TRIES TO SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT BY SUGGESTING WHAT CULTURAL WORKERS AND INDUSTRIAL WORKERS CAN DO TOGETHER TO COMBAT EXPLOITATION.



Efforts which proved unsuccessful have been made in the past to bring black South African artists together into a united national force. In the late fifties and early sixties, we had a cultural centre in Johannesburg (Bantu Men's Social Centre). Here were the offices of Union Artists, the only coherent body which represented creative workers then, but which, for one reason or the other, died in the early sixties. Since then nothing has come up which really stands for unity of artists and articulates their aspirations, frustrations and objectives.

The apartheid colonialist has taken the land, exploits our wealth and labour and to some extent, calls the political tune; has failed to colonise our cultural heritage. Having wisened up to that, his next move was to arrest it so that it advance no further; and in its place popularise western consumer-oriented (mainly American) culture among the oppressed. This has to some extent succeeded as witnessed by the entry into our society of American style clothes that were made popular by B-grade gangster movies. This went together with jazz, and different periods in the USA reflected themselves in South Africa in the clothes, music, theatre, for example, "King Kong", etc. For over four decades we have borne witness to a proliferation of western cultural styles and values in all forms. We have noticed the portrayal of the effects of the advent of capitalism — Jim Comes to Jo'burg. Now Jim wants to go to USA (Hollywood, Carnegie Hall, Studio 54, etc.)!

Though what follows will touch upon other aspects of art and culture, more focus will be directed to music as an art form.

The Nationalist regime, through a myriad of laws, has closed nearly all avenues of free musical expression. This they have done by excluding any type of music that goes against their interests of perpetuating racist supremacy from the radio and now TV through the Brederbond-controlled SABC. Faced with this state of affairs, recording companies, capitalist-owned and quick-profit-oriented, became willing partners in the campaign to throttle the black song. Only "happy-happy" music that set the nation dancing itself into oblivious disregard of the meaning of commitment was allowed. Banal songs with meaningless lyrics are the ones that get pressed on wax. Choral music — which is a favourite with a vast majority of our people — has been effectively and insidiously denuded of political content. Simultaneously with the above processes, at the end of the fifties, the Boers realised the stupidity of their policy of prohibiting Africans from drinking western liquor — there was also the frustrating question of their inability to tax illicit brews that served as an alternative — and open the door widely to the Africans. This was an act that served the system in two ways. Firstly, the capitalists made huge profits and the regime gave itself the sole right of operating bars and bottle stores in the townships. Secondly, the black masses happily drank openly, danced to the Mickey Mouse music the regime allowed, went to church on Sundays and reported to the boss on Monday with a legal hangover. Everybody was happy all round.

To drink, host and attend parties over the weekend, the worker had to stay employed, and to relieve his frustrations stemming from exploitation and the treadmill he found himself on, the

bottle and the noise coming from gramophones and radios were his only solace, and finally his padre exhorted him to contribute his tithe to the Bank of the Holy Ghost, serve his boss well and expect a better life after death. That was and still is the vicious cycle, complete and serving to dull the consciousness of the masses regarding their future — and their plight.

### Jim Goes to the USA

Let us then look at the position of the musicians. Throughout the past four decades, bands have sprung up and disappeared. We speak with nostalgia nowadays of the Elite Swingsters, Merry Blackbirds, the Teachers Band of Port Elizabeth, the Manhattan Brothers, Woody Woodpeckers, African Quavers, and so on. There were and are memorable names like Ntemi Piliso, Nathan Mdledle, Skip Pahlane, the Dark City Sister, Lemmy Special Mabaso — who is with the Soul Brothers today — and others who have cut records that have immortalised them. A few flew out of the cuckoo's nest: Makeba, Dollar Brand, Jonas Gwanga, Hugh Masekela, Letta Mbulu and Katse Semanya. Katse and Letta are based in the USA. Gwanga and Masekela are in Gaborone. Others like Kippie Moeketsi remained behind to face a slow death in the South African wilderness. Others emerged in the sixties and seventies while some are still emerging in the eighties. All these groups and personalities have more than once been exploited by recording companies, agents, managers, producers, promoters, hustlers, and so on. There is not a single South African black musician who doesn't have a sad story to tell. The exploitation still continues and it is still difficult for musicians to unite.

At this juncture, it would be necessary to look at some of the causes militating against music unity. Apartheid has reduced a black musician to the status of a beggar whereby the road to a job is strewn with obstacles, such as stiff competition among musicians: the winner, at the end, sells himself short and gets ridden like a horse, since he offers cheap labour. One sees queues at recording companies of men pleading to be recorded. If not this, they are out there looking for jobs as studio artists. Poverty keeps musicians worried about the next meal, rent, clothes for his family, money to pay off the H.P. on the musical instruments and so forth. There is seldom time to reflect on the past and the future and whenever musicians meet in large numbers, normally at concerts or massive festivals, the mood is not conducive for any serious discussion. The talk is often about the whereabouts of the next gig, who to contact for which job, when is SABC offering openings for commercials, etc. There is no time to deal with the problems of royalties, studios fees, recording rights, that is, the problems that should be tackled by people who have formed themselves into a strong bargaining body — it would be a real strain on the imagination to think of artists under these circumstances really sitting down and discussing the state of the nation. In most cases, bands split within two years of their formation. Most musicians end up standing at the factory gates looking for jobs, frustrated and bewildered, angry. Truly, a few bands make it! These are the bands that have mastered the trick



of keeping the master content by churning out the "right sound and beat". One of these bands is the well-known Harari.

They adopted this name after playing at Harare Township during Smith's rule. Harari comes from the stock of bands that mushroomed in the sixties, bands that fused American Soul music with the township beat. Most of them like the Teenage Lovers, Flaming Souls, Inne Lawes, Movers of the "monkey jive" era, died in the seventies with the change of the American sound or, shall we say, the progression of American music from one level of mediocrity to the other? This brings us in that much debatable question of aesthetics.

Harari, formerly known as the Beaters, moved from soul to British/American rock that found its apogee in the Woodstock era, Afro-Rock that is borrowed from the criss-cross rhythms of Osibisa and presently a mixture of Santana-Mtume-Davie Bowie, Afro-Rock and Disco.

Harari has moved with the times. Gallo (an incredibly large number of black musicians wouldn't mind burning the Gallo studios to the ground!) went on a massive recording/publicity campaign for Harari. Harari keeps the nation dancing and also advertises products which, on closer scrutiny, are as covered with tinsel as is their music. The erstwhile leader of the band, Siphon Mabuse, when asked about the band's future, answered that Harari's dream was a trip to the USA! They did get their trip to the USA and how they were treated there is a subject of another essay. The only competition Harari faces is from groups that play "crossover" like Juluka, Steve Kekana and others whose music is "nice to hear" — and that's just about all!!

### Let's take a look at theatre

Without delving much upon the historical developments of theatre in our ghettos, we should look at the frustratingly uphill battle that serious theatre has to fight inside the country, the conundrums faced by actors and playwrights in our society.

"Quality" theatre left our shores for Britain and USA in the early sixties. Remember King Kong? Sponono? The vacuum left was filled by people like Gibson Kente with his unspeakably contrived, screamingly unfunny productions that use every known theatre cliché in the book. The damaging quality of Kente's work is that it is loud in the land about the injustices perpetrated on the dispossessed and wretched of the earth but not even a single play — sketch would be more appropriate — ever addresses itself to giving our people some direction as to how they could do away with these injustices. The advent of black consciousness brought a sudden upsurge of radical theatre with students mainly taking part. There were plays like Shanti, Requiem for Brother X, and so on, which like many other things in black consciousness at the time were borrowed from Black Americans, namely Ed Bullins, Douglass Turner Ward, Le Roi Jones (Imamu Baraka) and many others. One should not, however, get the illusion that the racists sat on the wings and applauded. No. There were many obstacles that lay athwart the path of this new development. Harassment, detention and death were risks cultural workers of the moment faced. This was the time



Nathan Mdledle, left, plays the lead part in KING KONG, a musical that catapulted a lot of black South African artists to fame.

of paranoia and hysteria when the censors and the Security Police viewed a poem as an AK 47 in inchoation. This era was followed by a proliferation of two-man plays popularised by The Wild Geese actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona, for example, Sizwe Banzi is Dead, which won them Tony Awards. Perhaps for the first time this genre came closer to addressing itself to the realities of South African life. In a bid to counter this development, the regime, through its administration boards, demanded to see scripts before they were put up in the regime's halls in the townships. These halls serve as venues for concerts, theatre, bioscope, boxing and so on.

This is how the regime tried to phase out radical theatre in the townships. Obscenities like The Schoolgirl and the Taxi Driver were allowed to serve as the only source of entertainment. Radical theatre found a home in liberal centres in the cities like at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, Baxter and Space theatres in Cape Town, etc., and also at liberal universities. The regime turns a blind eye, as the performances are far from the working masses, are quite expensive and serve white intellectuals, students and the few blacks who can afford.

More than once newspapers have carried stories of actors not remunerated, taken for a ride, left stranded on tours by producers. Worse



still are stories of actresses being harassed and exploited sexually — this pressure made to bear upon them if they want parts in plays. On the whole one gets a picture of sleazy disorganisation and depravity on the part of management and the attendant insecurity among workers connected with theatre. Phoenix Players, a centre of actors is and has been a place of exploitation. From time immemorial, it has been run by one Ian Berhardt, a white businessman who has "made it" so much so that he was planning to emigrate to the USA. Actors and actresses who have worked under Kente (Sikalo, Lifa, etc.) and Mzwandile Maqina (Give us this Day) also have their own stories to tell.

Efforts have been made to bring actors together to form a union. Some had temporary success, such as the SA Black Theatre Union of the black consciousness era, before the regime's clampdown. Others suffered an energy crisis from the very beginning, the latest effort failing in 1980. The situation of white artists who are protected by law is well-known. There are organisations like the SA Music Association, PACT, etc., securing the interests of white artists. Time should not be wasted discussing the other side of the moon.

### The Present Anti-Imperialist Cultural Movement

It was mentioned previously that there are bands and groups that won't have the wool pulled over their cultural eyes by the regime. There are also hosts of individuals, musicians who are part of the movement that won't ever sell its soul to the Shylocks and moneychangers.

In nearly every township one can think of there is a cultural group that has connexions with a church or a youth club, or carries on autonomously. These are centres of experimentation where alternative theatre abounds, where other creative art forms are learnt. It is in these centres that original poetry is recited and guitars plunk messages that strike terror into the hearts of the sell-outs and their bosses. Here are tambourines, congas, acoustic guitars, ready to accompany voices raised in triumph, in rage, in hope. Here you might find a well-equipped amateur band, a solo artist, a poetry group. You won't hear these young artists playing Cliff Richard's latest song. Their music celebrates that thing in them that sees the need to fight for freedom. The inclination may be towards reggae, or original catchy tunes, or freedom songs, or traditional songs, or poetry ... anything but the *muzak* popularised by the state and recording companies. It is some of these groups that appear at commemoration services, celebrations or political meetings to render a song, a poem or a short drama. Also, there are the other professional groups that are patronised by intellectuals, students, the white left, and so on. The number of these bands is not so big, they manage to survive as professional bands by playing at small clubs, universities, colleges, liberal theatres and cultural centres such as Diakonia, Open School, etc. Some of these bands emerged after the fire of 1976: AK47, Afrozania, Malopoets, Tou, Malimu, Badiri, Sakhile and others. Also there is the third category that comprises of recordable groups and individuals like Juluka, Steve Kekana (remember his song The Bushman?), Joy and others, for example *mbaqanga* groups who have from time to time

performed at concerts organised to raise funds for working class causes.

Groups have been brought together during the Fattis & Monis and Wilson-Rowntree strikes to raise funds for striking workers. It was indeed gratifying to see those groups coming forward knowing fully well the likely reaction of the regime's Gestapo. JOY, the female vocal trio, refused to perform for "the boys at the border" when asked to do so by the South African Death Force during their tour of Namibia. Shortly thereafter, the SABC stopped playing Paradise Road over the air and a feeble explanation was given implying the existence of subversive undertones in the song. The song had long reached the number one spot on the charts and was well within the second gold disc mark. All these groups, including those that are now working with recording companies, need to come together as a strong anti-apartheid, anti-imperialist, progressive and democratic union of South African musicians and artists.

### Groundings for our brothers

The Federated Union of Black Artist (FUBA), which was built with Anglo American's and other allied capitalist organisations' funds, has always been that glamorous institution which produces a certain type of artist: one that views creativity as an entree into the higher social strata of our society.

Recently, FUBA hosted an exhibition





of paintings of some of America's and Europe's artists at the Lower Houghton home of Harry Oppenheimer's daughter, Mary. South African artists did not take part. When asked about this glaring omission, FUBA director Sipho Sepamla replied to the Press that black artists were difficult to reach — meaning, of course, that they were not on the phone, live far from town, and so on. This is Sepamla's excuse for class discrimination. So much for the Federated Union of Black Artists.

The Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute (MDALI) has for a long time seen itself as the saviour of South African cultural workers. It has, however, antagonised a lot of artists with its exclusivist brand of black consciousness. Of the two organisations, MDAI is the oldest coming from the early black consciousness days and could easily have gained respectability, support from the community and the membership of artists. But, like an old spider, it sits in its web in a dark corner, refusing to move out into the light. Like most b.c. organisations, one comes across MDAI mostly in newspapers in the form of press statements; in rare cases at commemoration services.

There is a lot of vibrant cultural activity inside the country outside the "established" structures. In the Cape there are numerous progressive cultural groups. In Natal and the Orange Free State almost all locations boast of one or two cultural formations. There are over 50 cultural groups in the Transvaal. All these operate outside the system. All these different formations need to be brought together into a strong, creative, democratic force of the people's voice.

### Trade Unions and Culture

The history of the South African trade union movement is one of battles won and lost; it is of gains and skirmishes against the bosses and the racist tyranny of South Africa; it is of an uphill struggle for workers' organisations and unity. A struggle for economic rights as well as (in alliance with the national liberation movement) for the political rights of the oppressed people in the land. The history reads as an impressive catalogue of bold strikes for economic demands; pitched battles with the regime and bosses. It is a baptism in fire which culminated in the formation of SACTU in 1955 as a realistic compass for the trade union movement, anchored in the revolution.

The trade union movement has the difficult task of establishing one union for one industry and one united trade union federation for the whole country. Considering the odds against the workers, unions and trade unionists, much has been done to organise the workers. It is a slow process but one can say that of the 10 million or so workers at least 1 million are organised into trade unions. The growing militancy of the workers indicates their growing awareness of their strength as a class. Workers' political awareness is high. The workers and their unions can be of inestimable help in politicising and organising their cultural counterparts by inviting or adopting them into their fold. Here, we can address ourselves to *how* and *why* this could be done, and in that manner we would be dealing with the heart of this discussion, *Trade Unions and Cultural Workers in South Africa*.

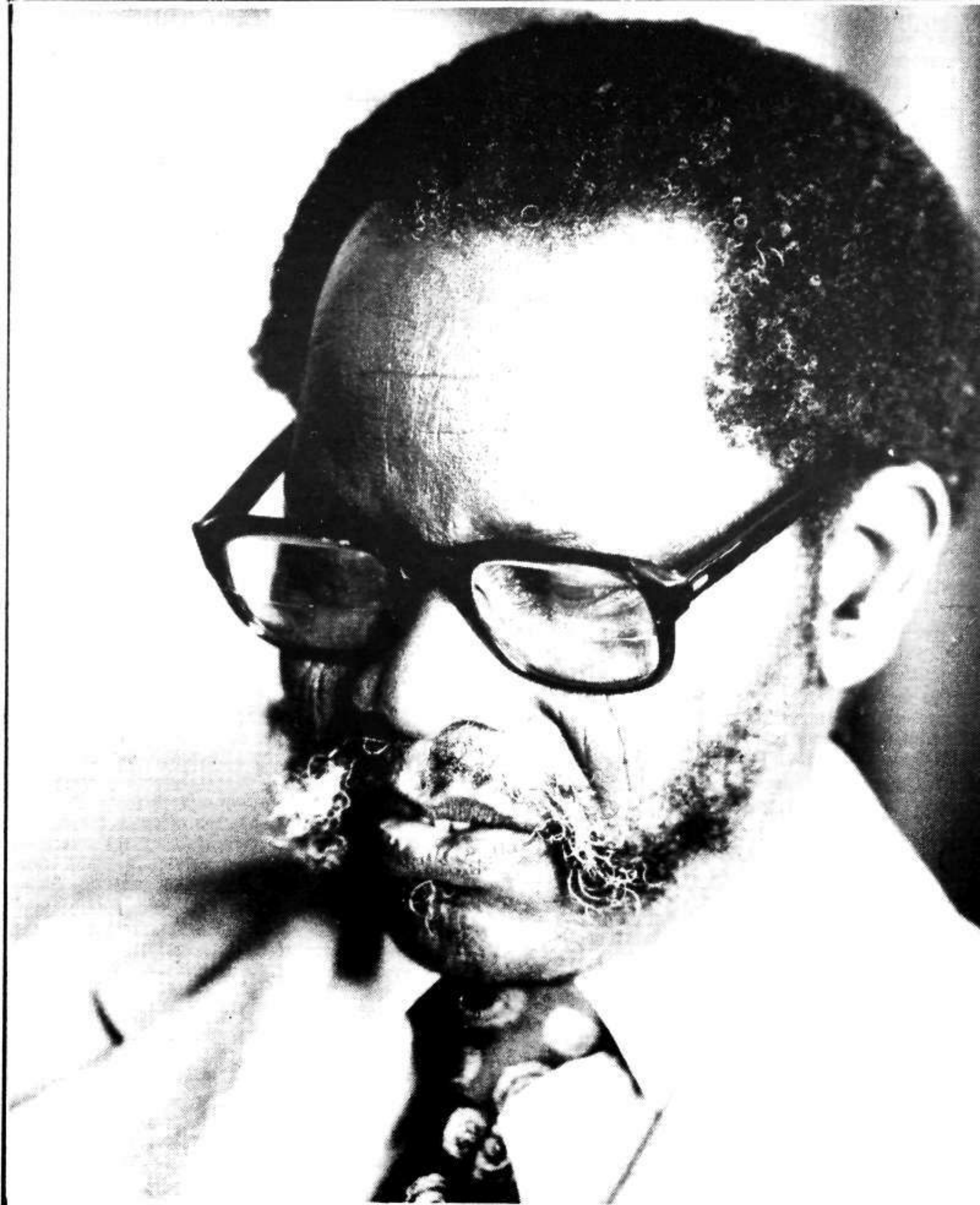
In dealing with the *why* of the matter, it will be seen that 80% of the reasons have been given dealing with disunity and disorganisation of artists. The speedy unity of the trade unions themselves would undoubtedly lessen the enormous task of unionising artists. But with the situation still unresolved, the following could happen: FOSATU, GAWU, SAAWU, GWU, AFCWU, FCWU, etc., are spread out and have representations countrywide. Each of these unions, trade union centres and affiliates have branches in almost all industrial towns and cities right up to chapters within the factories, workplaces, etc. A metal industry union, such as MAWU, could adopt a band, a theatre group, a group of artists, painters, sculptors, etc., (people in the industry could be taught iron and steel sculpture, for instance) and a group of writers. These would take care of creative entertainment at meetings, fundraising shows, make creative educational, agitational or informative posters for union purposes, run a union newsletter, to cite a few practical examples. The artists could be grouped at regional levels of operation and come together at national level when the need arises.

With all unions and union centres adopting groups or whole cultural units, creative workers shall begin interacting with workers on a large scale, learning more about workers' issues and getting involved in their struggle. The fusion, the interaction, is too explosive to imagine! Artists will portray reality, musicians will sing about strikes; they will sing about unemployment and what should be done about it; plays will be based on the workers' struggles and our theatre will find creative sustenance from reality. On the other hand, stimulation of interest in and appreciation of culture will be enhanced among the workers. The two sides stand to benefit. What is of great importance is that the likely result of this marriage will be the perception of the need for unity, need for creative workers in their different fields to get together with industrial workers: this unity of cultural workers will finally take care of the issues affecting artists and act as an example for the future liberated South Africa.

The question of benefits for the artists is very exciting. A trade union or trade union centre could provide employment for, say, musicians, by providing venues and ready audiences throughout the country. The artists would be earning a living while simultaneously raising funds for the workers' organisations. Artists would not have to worry about airplay, galleries, etc., to reach the people. Their work would spread like wildfire. Wildflowers, for all seasons. This would be one way of keeping artists away from the false dreams created by imperialism. A reference point from where the creative worker has long been alienated will be rediscovered. In this way, the artist will be set on the new road leading to freedom, justice and progress.

The imperialists have long recognised the power of culture in winning the minds of the people. Now, the mobilization of artists is an urgent task. Cultural workers and workers through their unions and trade union centres are charged with the task of frustrating the designs of apartheid colonialism and imperialism, and ushering forth an era flowering with the free creativity of a liberated people.





PRESIDENT O.R. TAMBO

"WE CHARGE OUR CULTURAL WORKERS WITH THE TASK OF USING THEIR CRAFT TO GIVE VOICE, NOT ONLY TO GRIEVANCES, BUT ALSO TO THE DEEPEST ASPIRATIONS OF THE OPPRESSED AND EXPLOITED. IN OUR COUNTRY A NEW SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER IS BEING BORN. OUR ARTISTS HAVE TO PLAY AN EVEN BIGGER ROLE AS MIDWIVES OF THIS GLORIOUS FUTURE. LET THE ARTS BE ONE OF THE MANY MEANS BY WHICH WE CULTIVATE THE SPIRIT OF REVOLT AMONG THE BROAD MASSES, ENHANCE THE STRIKING POWER OF OUR MOVEMENT AND INSPIRE THE MILLIONS OF OUR PEOPLE TO FIGHT FOR THE SOUTH AFRICA WE ENVISAGE."



**Q:** In the January 8 statement of the National Executive Committee this year, prominent mention is given to the cultural field. How would you briefly define culture and the task of the artist in the struggle?

**A:** Culture could be said to be the cumulative responses of a people to their political, economic and social environment which, in historical perspective, have resulted in stabilised behavioural patterns or "a way of life". In the domain of the arts, artists interpret these responses in a creative and dynamic process which in turn influences the outlook and behaviour of society. The dominant class in any given society actively seeks to perpetuate itself and largely uses the medium of culture for this purpose.

The task of our artists is therefore to articulate our struggle, our hopes and aspirations using the varied forms created by their skills and talents. They can then grow into a powerful, recognisable force within the ranks of our broad liberatory movement throughout our country and beyond.

**Q:** Culture is often seen within our ranks as something mainly ornamental, recreational and entertaining. It is also sometimes seen as mainly for "cultured comrades", rather than for everybody. Is this a correct view for cadres of the liberation movement to hold?

**A:** On the one hand there is the elitist Eurocentric approach which associates culture with formal education and exposure to certain exclusivist cultural artifacts. In South Africa this view has been deliberately promoted and used for bolstering white supremacy since the whites have always had the monopoly of access to these cultural "prerequisites".

But for the majority of the people on the exploited end of the scale, culture is depicted as neutral entertainment in order to blind the oppressed to its revolutionary potential. In fact all people are involved in culture,

both the performer and the spectator who reacts to what he or she sees or hears.

The ANC cadre should always be aware of this involvement and consciously accept the responsibility to engage in some form of cultural activity which in one way or another brings out the content and direction of the struggle.

**Q:** We have this situation where South African artists who are by no means apologists for the regime, go abroad to present their works and talents. In view of the cultural boycott, what is our attitude to this.



**A:** Our position on this is clear. There should be no cultural links with racist South Africa. As part of our struggle, we give all the encouragement to those South African artists who, in their works, are fighting against the apartheid system with all its injustices. Foreign artists who support our cause should actively engage in anti-apartheid activities, either as artists or on a broader plane, within their respective countries.

**Q:** Despite everything, the cultural scene inside South Africa is vibrant. There are impressive inventive advances as well as technical progress in theatre, writing, dance, music, fine art, even film. On the other hand, culture in the ANC is primarily on the agit-prop model. How can we ensure that we, as ANC cultural workers, do not become irrelevant in a liberated South Africa?

**A:** The ANC promotes the cultural development of our people and there are no cultural barriers, either geographic or aesthetic, between the ANC cultural workers inside and outside South Africa and the vibrant culture of the people. There is therefore no question of ANC cultural workers being irrelevant.

It is a matter of fact that cultural workers inside the country operate under the constraints of limited training facilities, but they are the ones who determine (within the confines of the apartheid system) what is South African culture. The few who are outside operate under relatively

free conditions and can acquire unlimited skills and benefits from exposure to world culture.

There are cultural institutions in South Africa, but these serve a small elitist minority and are geared towards promoting certain values, most of which are inimical to our goal of a democratic, unitary and non-racial South Africa. By training cultural technicians, administrators, teachers and artists in various disciplines, we would ensure that the existing institutions can be reorganised to serve the type of society we envisage.

**Q:** The Department of Arts and Culture is planning a Community Cultural Centre for Dakawa. What do you think are the minimum cultural facilities which should be made available in a given community, Dakawa for example?





*Abdullah Ibrahim: a portrait of a committed musician at work.*

A: I would say that minimal cultural facilities for any community would be a cinema, a library, a theatre for performing arts, sports facilities, centres for arts and crafts, etc. which would cater for children, youth and the adult population.

The Dakawa Cultural Centre should therefore be a live active centre for creating and training cultural activists and, more importantly, producing artistic works as well as traditional and modern crafts. The range is unlimited: woodwork, beadwork, pottery and ceramics, jewelry, silk-screening, leatherwork, batik, etc.

Q: There is an ongoing campaign by the racist regime to cultivate a black middle class that will find itself defending the regime. The media plays a big part in this process. How should cultural workers combat this?

A: Our people are continuously bombarded with various forms of cultural influences meant to give them a false, escapist and anti-liberation orientation. We must congratulate the musicians, poets, writers and other artists

who have successfully withstood this cultural onslaught and have been able to engage in more meaningful community-oriented cultural activities.

We exhort our people, in their various formations — as youth, women, workers, professionals, the converted and the animists, to counter this intellectual and moral attack and help to create viable, constructive and nation-building values among our people.

Q: How can we preserve our traditional African culture(s) — language, oral literature, dance — and simultaneously avoid the pitfalls of tribalism and chauvinism?

A: The apartheid enemy tries to separate us into ancient "tribal" entities and pretends to be concerned with the preservation of our cultural heritage. We are one people with a rich cultural heritage which manifests itself in many variations. Our task is not to preserve our culture in its antique forms but to build on it and let it grow to assume a national character, the better to become a component of all evolving world culture.

In this context language, oral literature, dance, etc., become elemental parts of the national culture — a people's possession rather than a means of tribal identification. In any case the notion of "tribe" has colonial origins, is promoted by colonial regimes and serves the purposes of "divide and rule". Culture does not divide. It unites because it is a universal possession.

Q: Comrade President, are you optimistic about the role cultural work will play in the building of our future, non-racial, democratic and liberated South Africa?

I am more than optimistic; I am confident. For, cultural work is already playing an increasing role in the struggle for a liberated South Africa. Through struggle we are cultivating a sense of common nationhood, embracing the entire people, wherein various cultural strains are seen as components of a united people's national culture rather than works of separate identity; where diversity lends variety and richness to the experience of life in society.

A future non-racial and democratic South Africa will be a product, not least, of our conscious cultural work.