

Jazz, space and power in apartheid South Africa: The army and the church

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a dramatic trope of “actors”, “theatres”, and scripts, this paper theorises some ways in which the power relations that attend individuals’ experiences of performing and listening to jazz are inflected by the spaces and places in which those experiences transpire. Empirically, the paper focuses on the memories of interviewed jazz musicians and audience-members active on the jazz scenes of post-apartheid Durban and Johannesburg. It describes how some of these musicians’ and listeners’ participation in the military and church spaces of apartheid South Africa variously enabled, constrained, and ultimately politicized their musical activities.

KEYWORDS: jazz; space; power; apartheid South Africa.

This paper draws on the thinking of critical geographers Doreen Massey (1993) and David Harvey (1990) who denaturalise and politicise notions of space, and highlight the central role space plays in the negotiation and contestation of power relations. Extending their ideas to a discussion of jazz’s performance and reception in apartheid South Africa, it considers how the physical settings of some interviewed individuals’ musical experiences placed them in different networks of power relations.

My description of power’s operations involves a dramatic trope of “actors”, “theatres”, and “scripts”. As in social science discourse, “actors” refers to individuals, who enact power relations. “Theatres” – the focus of this paper – refers to the social

domains such as homes, schools, churches, etc., where power dynamics play out. Finally “scripts” are meta-narratives like apartheid or capitalism that underwrite power’s operations on macro-social and trans-historical levels. Respectively, these terms highlight the performative, spatial, and ideational dimensions of power relations.

Convened by casts of actors, “theatres” – whether countries, cities, or homes – are the physical sites of social action where power’s operations are framed, filtered and concretized. Theatres are mediatory arenas where meta- and micro-narratives interface, and they exist as politicised and politicising spaces on four levels.

First, theatres exercise power by granting access to some actors and refusing entry to others. Thus churches bring together priests and parishioners rather than pimps and prostitutes. Often characterised by pecking orders (executives, secretaries, and cleaners in corporate environments) theatres also frame power relations by emplacing the actors they host in variously equal or unequal relations to one another. These “intra-theatrical positionalities” then pre-script and presuppose certain behaviours, or kinds of performance, on the part of those occupying them.

Second, theatres partially predetermine actors’ status as speakers and addressees of power, and variously aggravate or alleviate practices of exclusion and stratification such as sexism or racism, by setting the terms within which different subject positions are rendered salient or irrelevant.

Third, different objects’ and attributes’ status as capital depends on the theatres within which they occur. Thus, while musical talent is a valuable attribute in a music school or on a concert stage, it is of little value in a boxing ring!

Finally, the actors convened within a specific theatre may be empowered and/or disempowered by the concurring and/or competing action of different meta-narratives, and, acting individually or collectively, successfully and/or not, may variously advance, accept, ignore, avoid, challenge, defy, or outright negate the controlling force of different scripts. In short, theatres are scripted and scripting arenas that *refract* the power effects of macro-social forces.

Focusing on Johannesburg bassist Carlo Mombelli’s experiences in the army, and other interviewees’ experiences in the church, I will now specify some ways in which music, space, and power intertwined in apartheid South Africa.

Mombelli’s memories of his experiences in the army in the late 1970s are illustrative of the ways music can function as a site of struggle and vehicle of resistance. Despite various attempts to avoid recruitment, the eighteen-year-old Mombelli, like most school- or university-leaving white men in apartheid South Africa, was conscripted into compulsory military service:

I tried all possibilities to try and get out of the army. I told them I was gay, I told them all sorts of shit. I landed up in the infantry, was put inside a tank. I didn’t want to be part of this. (Mombelli 2003)

Mombelli’s resistance took many forms; his response to the regular inspections of boots and uniforms is a case in point. He only ever wore one of the pairs of boots

and one of the two sets of uniforms that they were issued, reserving the other exclusively for inspections. He had varnished his boots, so that they always shone perfectly, and had sewn the uniform onto box cardboard so that all the creases were perfectly in place. Then on those evenings when his fellow conscripts were busy preparing themselves for the following morning's inspections, Mombelli

would get into the cupboard and close the door. I used to sit in there the whole night thinking, what am I doing here? I used to smoke and just smoke and just smoke. When I came out, pfff all this smoke would come out. Hey! And Mombelli arrived out of this cupboard; so they thought I was a nutcase.

Things got worse for me. The corporals were having this big party and they knew I was a musician. 'Could I organise a band?' I said, 'Yah, no problem but I need a few days to come up to Pretoria to get musicians'. So I came all the way up here – and I got [some musicians]. They smoke so much *zol!* you can't imagine and by the time they got down to Bloemfontein they were all high. Now, [the corporals] were expecting some popular stuff. Not us hey! We just jammed! I wasn't in anyone's good books then. I had to get out of there. I angled: I said there was something wrong with my testicles – I had to go to the hospital. On the way to the hospital, I sneaked out of the camp, went up to Pretoria and organised a transfer onto the entertainment unit. (ibid.)

Although Mombelli would no doubt have been relieved to be out of the infantry, he remained irrepressibly resistant during the four years he was required to serve in the entertainment unit and while there, he refused to play anything except original music:

The entertainment unit played at the general's wedding and shit like that. All I wanted to do was play original music while they wanted to hear "Tie a yellow banana round the tree" or whatever. They said I'm a pseudo-intellectual bass player. Nobody could play with me. They put me in the office, working at everyone's leave. That was fine. Because I wasn't playing anymore, I could do my outside gigs. (ibid.)

Mombelli additionally turned things round to his advantage by "using" the army to further his music education:

In the entertainment unit, whoever saw me coming ducked because I made a pain of myself; I always had a note pad or score paper and managed to corner every single horn player (they had a big band) and ask a few questions: 'Where is your favourite note? Where is your favourite range? What are your difficult notes?' When the big band was playing, I would pitch up with an arrangement I'd done in the office and I would always ask everyone to play it for me. Then, if it sounded shit, I would analyse it and ask them 'Tell me, why didn't that work?' (ibid.)

Mombelli's army experiences represent an unusually "black-and-white" situation of a starkly authoritarian theatre and an especially resistant actor who resolutely refused cooption. Ordinarily, however, and as various interviewees' recounting of their experiences in church will reveal, power dramas typically play out in more subtle shades of grey.

As the theatres vested with the primary responsibility and privilege of staging different versions of the "God-script", churches, temples, mosques, etc. can – working collectively – powerfully influence the nature of macro-social power dynamics; individually, they may likewise significantly affect the tenor of micro-social power relations in smaller theatres existing within their sphere of influence, such as schools and homes. This has been especially true of churches in South Africa, where Christianity has been central both to the processes of white domination as well as anti-apartheid resistance.

Not unexpectedly, several interviewees made reference to the church: as a *locus* of anti-apartheid politics; as a controlling (but largely empowering) force in their early lives. The post-Vatican II Catholic Church, for example, was fierce in its condemnation of apartheid, and in the early 1970s, during the "height" of apartheid, pianist Neil Gonsalves and his family were members of a racially mixed congregation:

The [Catholic] church [in Port Shepstone, one hundred km south of Durban] was fairly integrated: when I look at photographs [taken] in the church hall on my dad's birthday, it's not multiracial but bi-racial in that there are lots of Indian people and white people. (Gonsalves 2003)

More radically, drummer Lloyd Martin was part of an anti-apartheid Christian pop band in the mid-1980s to early 1990s:

We were banned by the government because we were going into the townships and we were contesting the theology of apartheid [as rationalized by] the NG Kerk². We said it's a load of crap. They tried to bribe us; they tapped our phones; they tried to take us out; a few of us were on the CCB³ hit list for extermination. It was bizarre because we never did anything; I've never been a card-carrying member of any political party. (Martin 2004)

The church has not only been a site of resistance to external, macro-social forces, but impacting "inwardly" on "subsidiary" theatres like the homes of its parishioners, has functioned as speaker of power on more micro-social levels. Neil Gonsalves, for example, attributes his becoming a keyboardist to his Catholic upbringing:

[My parents] decided to send [my brother and I for] organ lessons. I suppose they chose organ because we have that instrument at home and because we come from a Catholic family. They thought, 'Ah, well they can play in church as well'. (Gonsalves 2003)

Melvin Peters, who has been playing for Anglican services since he was twelve, experienced the church as an empowering space, central to his subsequent development as a jazz performer:

What was very influential was the whole connection with the church: I remember starting to play the organ when I was twelve years old. It was one of those which had two pedals which you had to pump. (It was like doing Jane Fonda!) [...] It really gave me a great deal of confidence just playing in front of people, so later on, that was never an issue. (Peters 2003)

For audience-member Michael Blake, the Methodist church was an empowering environment in a rather different way:

I used to be a church organist when I was at school. Instead of delivering newspapers or something, I played the organ which was more lucrative and less hard work [...] I had this very religious sort of enforced upbringing and I gave it up when I was about eighteen: I decided to give it up as one gives up smoking or something; it's just a habit. (Blake 2003)

As a power drama, Blake's experience of the church parallels Mombelli's stint in the entertainment unit of the army on two levels. First, although Blake and Mombelli experienced the church and army as inhospitable environments, they were required by more powerful forces (family and apartheid state) to inhabit these theatres because of their respective subject positions as "minor in a religious family" and "school-leaving white South African male". Second, both actors escaped cooption, and using music as a tool, surreptitiously empowered themselves by refusing to follow, and strategically revising, the game rules of these theatres. Blake's musical contribution to the church involved a cynical duality: "externally" his organ-playing would have been read by church and family as performances of religiosity, whereas "internally", he was accessing a useful source of pocket money. Refusing to play anything except original music, and labelled musically incompetent by the army, Mombelli similarly defused the disempowering energies around him; as such, he was able to use his time in the army to improve his skills as a composer and arranger and to play, outside its confines, the gigs that he wanted to do.

There are many more examples but for now I'll wrap up. Musicking individuals' experiences of power are not just a function of the subject positions they occupy, but are also complexly inflected by the physical spaces in which those experiences transpire. In this paper I hope to have shown that there is much to be gained from paying close theoretical attention to space as a category in social/musical analysis.

ENDNOTES

1. Marijuana.
2. The *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) was the “religious wing” of apartheid discourse.
3. The ominously named Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) was a special police unit set up by the apartheid government to quash civil dissidence.

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