Singing for Justice: The Legacy of Miriam Makeba as a Popular Protest Songwriter and Performer

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Abstract

"Music emerges as always already grounded in the social, as an avenue of cultural contestation or social and political engagement" (Peddie xvi). Like all art forms, popular music is inherently reflective of the socio-political realities of its time, and this allows it to become one of the most common and functional tools for embodying the spirit of collective struggle and identity. Protest songs are born out of the desire to voice the aspirations and frustrations of one's people, who are often at the receiving end of oppressive regimes. As such, protest songs resonate deeply with the lived experiences of communities striving for justice and freedom. This paper aims to explore and highlight this critical nexus between popular protest songs and socio-political movements, emphasizing its transformative potential for facilitating systemic changes across the globe. This paper will further examine the singer, performer and activist Miriam Makeba as one of the pioneering artists in South Africa who used her music to advocate for political change and became a symbol of resilience and protest.

Keywords: Popular Music, Anti-apartheid, Protest Songs, Social Justice, Miriam Makeba

Introduction

The tradition of using songs to convey discontent and mobilize communities against external threats is almost as old as civilization itself. The forms, contexts and sources of protest songs may have changed over time, yet the tradition has endured and evolved with such movements as the civil rights movement in the United States, anti-apartheid movements in South Africa, and independence movements in erstwhile colonized nations, etc. William F. Danaher views such songs of protest as "important elements of social movements because they enable movements to disseminate messages far and wide, frame important issues, provide solutions to problems, use existing cultural forms to relate to protestors, and help adherents express their emotions" (67). Where states control the narrative and have coerced people into submission, popular protest songs become a vehicle for social and political change, serving as a potent medium for resisting domination. Popular songs have the potential to foster new solidarities and become "a vital force in preparing the emergence of a new movement" because they help to sustain a movement "even when it no longer has a visible presence in the form of organizations, leaders, and demonstrations" (Eyerman and Jamison 43). As such, popular music transcends its role as mere artistic expression, and serves as an effective force against oppressive powers in tandem with socio-political movements.

Origins and Evolution

The modern conception of protest music, especially as something that pertains to organized social movements, gained traction in public and academic discourse in the 1960s in the United States of America, particularly in the context of the Civil rights movement, Women's rights movements and opposition to the Vietnam War. It was during this period that "protest music and popular music were becoming increasingly intertwined via the youth counterculture and anti-war movement" (Dillane et al. 72). According to Piotrowska, "Protest in popular music is associated with opposition, contestation, revolt and resistance". It becomes a means of "resisting or undermining power relations of various kinds, or as a pivotal element in shaping the expression of politically relevant identities" (280).

In *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (1972), Serge R. Denisoff, one of the first sociologists to assess the importance of protest songs within social movements, categorized protest songs into "Magnetic" and "Rhetorical". He defined 'magentic' as the songs "which attract the non-participant to join the movement or reinforce the commitment level of adherents". By 'rhetorical', he meant those songs which direct our attention to "individual indignation and dissent…allow more space for musical sophistication and skill" (qtd. in Eyerman and Jamison 43). In a similar vein, Lieberman identifies songs as figurative weapons to counter-attack oppressive elements, while Kizer avers that these songs are rhetorical devices to mobilize and persuade the audience (3-11).

The countercultural movements of the 1960s-70s in the United States gave rise to songs that explicitly addressed a broad spectrum of issues, civil rights, anti-war, women's rights and other social justice issues. Songs like "The Times They Are a-Changin'", "Blowin' in the Wind" by Bob Dylan, "Gimme Some Truth" by John Lennon, "We Shall Overcome" sung at different occasions by Pete Seeger and Joan Baez made protest songs popular and a global phenomenon. African-American artists came up with songs that blended traditions of soul, jazz and later hip-hop to promote the ideals of the Black Power Movement.

Although the specific phrase "protest music" gained popularity in the mid-twentieth century USA, the songs of protest originate from a variety of backgrounds and histories, not exclusively American. The use of songs as a voice of protest and social commentary is a longstanding tradition including but not limited to anti-slavery, anti-colonial, anti-poverty, anti-war and other political campaigns. For instance, in the late eighteenth century, the African American community of slaves came up with songs called 'Spirituals' which subverted the biblical texts by combining "hymn phrases with slaves' favourite parables and folk tales, and preachers often lined out the verses through call and response (Peretti 8). Some well known spirituals include: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child", and "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen" and Go Down, Moses", etc.

Popular protest songs have played a seminal role in colonized nations, where music was often intertwined with broader counter-hegemonic practices. In contrast to written texts that excluded a large section of society who were illiterate, popular songs became a shared medium that transcended literacy barriers and fostered collective identity and solidarity. In addition, these songs were easily disseminated and distributed even when other forms of publications that

explicitly critiqued the government were suppressed and banned. According to Eyerman and Jamieson, in the 1930s, "a new social movement context appropriated the emergent tradition of folk music to its own political purposes" (40). In the 1930s, Calypso songs "historically linked to both emancipation and decolonization" gained prominence in the British colony of Trinidad and Tobago to protest against the oppressive colonial regime and emerged as a form of 'autoethnography', through which the artists "could represent themselves and retell history with their image and voice fully included"(Balliger 15-20). The movement garnered international attention with the songs of artists like Atilla the Hun, Roaring Lion, Lord Kitchener, etc. and the publication of the album named *Calypso* by the American singer and activist Harry Belafonte.

In a similar vein, the Nueva Canción movement or New Song movement in folk music became popular in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin American countries including Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, as well as the Hispanic communities of the United States, as an expression of their 'pan-Latin' identity. The songs of artists like Chilean Victor Jara and Argentinian Mercedes Sosa blended folk cultural traditions with new popular and commercial renditions of already famous songs in a bid to establish a "political, economic, and cultural identity in order to counteract widespread cultural stereotyping, economic domination by transnational corporations, and political manipulation by North American policy" (Tumas-Serna 139).

During the Algerian freedom movement, popular musicians like Ahmed Saber and Blaoui Houari who supported the Front de Libération National (National Liberation Front) , used the traditional musical form 'Rai' which translates to 'opinion' in Arabic, as a tool for subverting the French colonial rule (Byerly 233). Essentially sung by young men and women known as *cheba* or *cheb* ('kid'), these songs, an eclectic blend of Arab-Andalusian music, jazz, Spanish flamenco, and French cabaret rhythms, became the cornerstone for Algerian youth sub-cultures.

The Protest Songs of Miriam Makeba

In June 2023, the song "Makeba" by the French singer and performer Jain became incredibly popular and was streamed across online platforms like tik-tok, instagram and youtube, sparking worldwide interest in the eponymous artist, Miriam Makeba also known as Mama Africa. Released originally in November 2015, the song pays homage to the South African singer, songwriter, activist and the first African artist to win a Grammy Award, Miriam Makeba whose songs addressed the political repression, social injustices and the struggles of South African people under the Apartheid regime. Apartheid is an Afrikans term which translates to 'apartness' or 'separation'; it was a discriminatory policy enforced by the government of South Africa in 1948 and institutionalized racial segregation and sanctioned white supremacy.

In African culture, music is already closely embedded in the day to day realities of people as compared to European nations (Makeba, *African Song* 17). However, during the apartheid period, popular music began increasingly used as the central medium of resistance against systemic racial oppression. Songs of protest became one of the most common and functional means of archiving individual and collective traumas and emerged as sites of memory to counter the 'official' narratives. The popularity of Makeba, who is also affectionately referred to as 'Mama Africa' or 'the Empress of African Song', is testament to the lasting legacy of her music

and her commitment to social justice. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1932, her songs went on to influence people across continents, transcending national borders. Her music was able to garner international recognition when she moved to the United States of America where she helped bolster the civil rights movement. Following her marriage, she moved to Guinea where she used her songs in the cause of liberation movements of numerous African nations.

Makeba was by no means the first female performer who garnered attention in her country; she built upon and contributed to the legacy of those that came before her. Before her, artists like Dorothy Masuka, who was the first South African woman of colour to have a successful singing career and Dolly Rathebe, her friend and mentor, both of whom were part of the show called ‘African Jazz and Variety’ which Makeba joined later as a soloist. Makeba started getting nationwide success when she joined the South African music band Manhattan Brothers and recorded her first hit “Lakutshn, Ilanga” in 1953 as the solo female lead singer. This song was originally written in Zulu about a young man remembering his beloved: “I will come looking for you everywhere/in the hospital, in the jails, until I find you”; it was recorded in English as “Lovely Lies” albeit without the controversial lyrics and replaced with : “You tell such lovely lies with your two lovely eyes” . It was during this period that the black music of South Africa was evolving significantly in relation to the apartheid regime as, according to Lara Allen, it was “the period between the establishment of the mass media for black consumers and the full institutionalization of high apartheid” (229).

In 1956, Makeba founded her own females-only singing group called The Skylark. These earlier songs were, in essence, adaptations of popular African-American jazz originals into Zulu and Xhosa rhythms, blended with the Anglican hymn style. According to Feldstein, the songs these groups produced “blended township music and tribal rhythms with American doowop and gospel music” (59). Makeba attracted the attention of the white liberal audience in South Africa when she starred in the 1959 musical *King Kong* based on the life of black South African wrestler Ezekiel Dlamini, directed by Leon Gluckman. Thereafter, she was introduced to the American director named Lionel Rogosin who introduced her to western audience with his movie *Come Back, Africa*. Makeba only appeared for a four-minute scene in which she played the role of a local singer and sang two songs. Her first solo international recording was with Harry Belafonte which included ‘Pata Pata’ and her rendition of the African click song or ‘Qongqothwane’. According to Ruth Feldstein, although the songs didn’t appear to be political yet “her encounters with audiences when she performed this celebratory melody transformed the literal meaning of the lyrics. Performances and reactions to these performances together shaped dialogues about race relations and gender” (7).

Initially her songs were careful and used ‘apparently non-confrontational’ and ‘cryptic lines’ to conceal subversive meanings; but after the death of several of her relatives during the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, Makeba increasingly and overtly emerged as “a politically engaged musical persona (Yashhachar 264). The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 in which police opened fire on a peaceful anti-apartheid demonstration who were protesting against the discriminatory Pass laws, catalyzed a transformation in Makeba’s music, further pushing her towards more politically charged themes. During the same time, her passport was revoked by the South African government and she was sentenced to 30 years of exile.

A few months before the Sharpeville massacre, Makeba had arrived in the United States in 1959 where she continued to perform at concerts across the country and here she was exposed to contemporary trends in African-American music, particularly the ones tied to the Soul Music (Ford 6) or Black Power movement. Through her songs, she drew the attention of western audiences to the discriminatory laws of South Africa and exemplified how political activism and popular culture reinforce each other as she extended her support to the civil rights movement. She leveraged her celebrity status for political purpose, appearing before the United Nations in 1962 and 1964 to testify against the apartheid regime and request imposition of economic sanctions against the South African National Party which was responsible for implementing apartheid in South Africa. According to Yair Hashachar, her songs "created spaces that were able to liberate the audience, even momentarily, from the constraints of ideology and to trigger a more expansive, possibly cosmopolitan identity engendering pleasure through musical means" (269).

For the first time since she had left, Makeba returned to Africa in 1962 to visit Kenya and support the country's freedom movement. Thereafter, she performed at the national celebrations of newly independent nations including, Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique and Angola. She popularized songs like "Aluta Continua" (The Struggle Continues), "Meadowlands" and "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (Lord Bless Africa) whose adaptations became the national anthems of newly decolonized nations of Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and post-apartheid South Africa. She became an icon for anti-colonial, pan-African and global Black Pride movements and rallied the collective struggle of people of African descent to a common fight against injustice within and outside South Africa.

Conclusion

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said established the importance of native artists as being integral to any political movement; likewise, the protest music of Miriam Makeba forms the "guiding imagination, intellectual and figurative energy" of anti-apartheid campaigns in South Africa (212). By integrating a number of African languages like Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho in her songs, and her distinctive 'click' sound, Makeba revitalized traditional singing styles and folklore thereby resisting cultural erasure and promoting indigenous identity. In other words, the spirit of protest transcends the lyrics and is embedded within the musical form of her songs itself.

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