

Music – a weapon of the struggle

Music played a vital role in resisting apartheid in South Africa and raising awareness abroad.

In South Africa, songs and chants were used to protest racial segregation even before apartheid was established in the late 1940s. Protesting crowds would sing songs such as *Senzeni Na* (meaning ‘What have we done?’) or *Somlandela Luthuli* (‘We will follow Luthuli’), often with women leading the harmonisation. *Shosholoz*a is a very popular traditional miners’ song, which was often sung at protests and by prisoners working in the quarry on Robben Island.

The South African government banned any music that was considered critical of apartheid. Popular musicians such as Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba were forced into exile. The singer Vuyisile Mini was given a death sentence for his ANC activities – other prisoners later recalled how he still sang defiantly from his cell the night before his execution. To avoid censorship, some musicians played with words to hide messages. For example, Yvonne Chaka Chaka used the phrase ‘winning my dear love’ to refer to Winnie Mandela.

Some White South Africans such as Johnny Clegg were more able to use music to express criticism of apartheid, although they could still be arrested or censored for their actions. From the mid-1970s, the ANC increasingly recognised the role of culture alongside political campaigning and this was formalised with ensembles and festivals.

Worldwide, solidarity groups were formed to raise awareness through music and to boycott performing in South Africa. In the UK, musician Jerry Dammers formed Artists Against Apartheid, released the global hit song (*Free Nelson Mandela*) and organised concerts. In the USA, Artists United Against Apartheid (AAA) added their support in 1985. In June 1988, the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Tribute concert at Wembley Stadium was watched by over 600 million people in 67 countries.

Raising international awareness through music piled the pressure on South Africa’s government to release political prisoners and end apartheid. After Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, he spoke at a second Wembley concert, continuing the call for change. Four years later he became South Africa’s first democratically elected president. The apartheid era was over.

Activities

- Students might write a song as if they are being censored. They could write a song (or just a title, or part of a song) that hides its meaning in word play.
- Miriam Makeba said: *"People say I sing politics, but what I sing is not politics, it is the truth"*. Invite students to choose an issue that means something to them today and write a song (or just a chorus or chant) that tells their truth.
- Many protest songs were about key figures in the Freedom Struggle. Students might make a list of all the songs they can find about these key people, and each choose an individual to learn more about. Why were they the subject of a song?
- Students might devise a musical assembly or show that uses songs to communicate the story of apartheid and the Struggle to other students. Use the resources below to select songs, which they might play as a soundtrack, or to perform if they are able to.
- Listen to the South African national anthem, which is sung in five languages. Which languages are they? Why were they chosen? What differences can students hear in the musical styles?

Resources

An account of key songs linking to videos
<http://www.okayafrica.com/anti-apartheid-songs-south-africa/>

A Spotify playlist of anti-apartheid songs
<https://tinyurl.com/ya36mtz3>

Video of Miriam Makeba explaining the click sounds in the Xhosa language
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Mwh9z58iAU>

The South African national anthem
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKynWhsY_-o

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21fOM6_D6_o