

Kwela!

Journey of the sweet penny whistle

The sound of the penny whistle, or *kwela*, still rings in people's ears years after its rapid rise in popularity and its equally sudden death. Yet how did it become so popular amongst all races in South Africa and why did it so abruptly disappear? **Lara Allen** tells the story.

The penny whistle is often cited as the sound that reminds people of the townships in the 1950s. Upbeat and plaintive, hopeful and haunting, *kwela* perfectly signals the era of glamorous gangsters, the Madiba boogie, the political innocence of passive resistance and the Defiance Campaign, small boys busking for coins in the streets, playing music that black and white people could rock 'n' roll to. But what about the reality behind the often nostalgic feelings that penny whistle music raises in people? Where did *kwela* come from? Why was it so popular? And why did it disappear so suddenly?

Penny whistles were played in South African townships as early as the 1900s, but they were first used extensively in the 1930s and 1940s by marching bands known as the Scottishes. These groups imitated Scottish Pipe bands, including their elaborate formation marching and gorgeous costumes.

However, the event that really made the penny whistle popular was its use in a film called *The Magic Garden*. It was released in 1951, the second film to be made in South Africa using a completely black cast. It was set in Alexandra Township and featured local

residents including a penny whistler named Willard Cele. Cele provided music for the many humorous chase scenes in the form of two numbers 'Penny Whistle Boogie' and 'Penny Whistle Blues'. Both were strongly influenced by American boogie-woogie. The penny whistle became an instant rage in the townships, with many small boys trying to copy their homeboy movie star, Willard Cele.

Local record companies, however, did not realise the penny whistle's commercial potential until three years later in 1954 when Spokes Mashiyane made his first recordings. Mashiyane grew up on a farm near Hammanskraal and spent much of his youth tending cattle. He started his musical career on reed flutes traditional in his area, later taking up the penny whistle. When he was 18 Spokes moved to Johannesburg to work as a domestic servant. There he formed a duo with a guitarist name France Pilane. They practiced together at the Zoo Lake Park on their days off where they were spotted by a talent scout and invited to record.

Mashiyane's recordings sold exceptionally well because his music was strongly dominated by local 'grassroots' musical elements. One of Mashiyane's penny

whistling friends, Albert Ralulimi, explained his appeal this way: "Spokes became more popular because he took tunes from the community - something that he felt. He went about *stokvels* and watching people singing their old songs ... So Spokes improvised the pattern of the type of music that was sung by anybody - or small boys playing on the street."

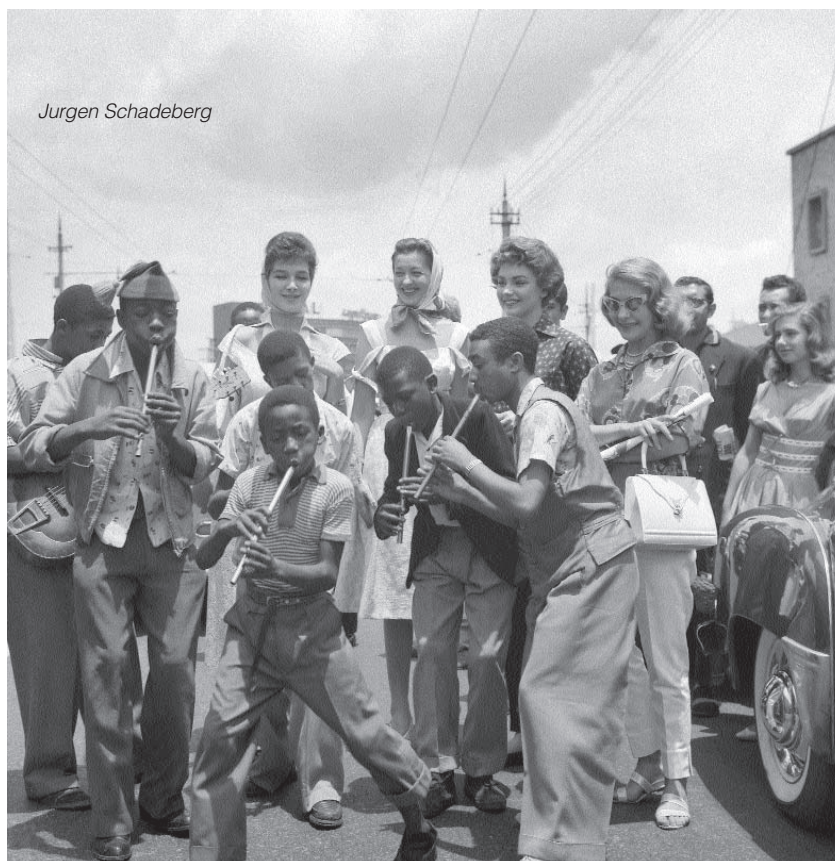
In fact, what Mashiyane got right was that he found that magic recipe so desired in the music industry. All the styles within the *marabi* tradition of urban, black South African music popular through the 20th century consist of a mix between whatever style was popular in the United States at the time and local South African musical elements. In time sequence the main styles in this tradition are *marabi*, *tsaba-tsaba*, *African Jazz*, *Vocal Jive*, *kwela*, *mbaqanga*, *soul-mbaqanga*, *South African disco*, *South African gospel*, and *kwaito*. These styles were influenced by American ragtime, jazz, swing, soul, disco, gospel, and hip-hop.

The extent to which particular styles or artists achieved box office success always depended on the extent to which their audiences aspired towards America, or wished to hear local experience expressed.

Throughout the century there tended to be more listeners who liked music strongly reflective of the local with just a touch of American influence, rather than the other way around. (This is still true today – *kwaito* musicians sell more than local American-style rap artists.) This is the reason that Mashiyane's brand of *kwela* was so much more popular than Willard Cele's American blues and boogie. It was more South African.

At the same time, however, urban South Africans have long suffered from what saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi described as an "overseas complex". The romance between South Africans (musicians and audiences) and American popular music tend to go through a four-phase cycle: attraction-imitation-indigenisation (or localisation)-recognition. Local musicians are attracted to the latest American style. They imitate it as exactly as possible, then start adapting it towards local tastes, and finally, in a few lucky cases, this indigenised product is recognised as valuable and interesting by audiences 'overseas'.

The event that made Mashiyane really famous was his work with the American pianist Claude Williamson in 1958. This coincided with another kind of overseas recognition for *kwela*. The number 'Tom Hark' was used as the theme tune for a British TV series set in South Africa. It became very popular in Britain and reached the top of the British Hit Parade. Suddenly *kwela* fever swept South Africa. The major black newspapers printed big feature articles and the critics (who previously had dismissed the simple, repetitive nature of *kwela*) suddenly praised the style. The record companies poured money into advertising and publicity, promoting their penny whistlers as big stars. They even



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released *kwela* on LPs aimed at a local white audience. (At the time recordings produced for the black buying public were issued on '78's.)

Besides all this, the British media made a curious but important contribution to the history of South African penny whistle music. At the beginning of 'Tom Hark' there is a short spoken introduction in *tsotsitaal* between street-corner gamblers playing dice. Someone sees the police and says, "Daar kom die *kwela-kwela*", meaning, "Here comes the police van". However, British DJs thought this phrase meant, "Here comes the *kwela* music" and started to refer to 'Tom Hark' as a style called *kwela*. Back in South Africa newspapers made much of the news that South African penny whistle music called *kwela* was making it big in Britain.

'Tom Hark' was played by two brothers, Elias and Jake Lerole, who grew up in Alexandra Township. They busked for passers-by in

Alexandra, in Johannesburg's bustling city centre, and in the northern suburbs where rich white people lived. Another *kwela* band from Alexandra Township to become famous was the Alexandra Bright Boys led by Lemmy 'Special' Mabaso. Lemmy 'Special' had a particularly entertaining way of jiving while he played, and he became very popular and successful. Other well known *kwela* musicians included Ben Nkosi, Barney Rachabane, and Peter Makana.

So what happened to *kwela*? Why don't we hear it on the streets anymore?

There are several answers. First, in popular music styles become fashionable, are in vogue for a while, and then a new style takes over. This is the case all over the world and through time. There was, however, an added force that affected the story of *kwela*: apartheid.

Musicians in general, and *kwela* players in particular, were very directly affected by the new apartheid laws that came in during the 1950s. Like other people, musicians suffered under the pass laws. However, as they were generally freelancers, musicians had very little chance of employment by a white person who could endorse their passes. Further, musicians could not attain 'self-employed' passes because music was not considered 'gainful employment' by the pass office. *Kwela* players were also harassed by the police under municipal bylaws, particularly for 'disrupting the traffic' or causing 'a public disturbance'. Therefore, although busking was a good way of raising money for penny whistlers, by the early 1960s police harassment had made the streets an impossible venue.

Meanwhile other apartheid laws debarred black musicians from most well-paying live performance venues. Under the Liquor Act, for instance, black musicians were not permitted to perform where alcohol was sold. This counted out bars, nightclubs, and most restaurants.

Further, the Separate Amenities Act prohibited racially mixed audiences and casts, and black people could not perform at venues reserved for whites. All public spaces were contested. At one point there was a furor in the press because an outraged citizen wrote a letter reporting that terrible 'goings-on' were occurring at the Zoo Lake Park on Sundays: young white teenagers were jiving disgustingly to the music of black penny whistlers. Holy terror was struck into the hearts of Johannesburg's city fathers and the

kwela musicians were banned from Zoo Lake. (Once everything quieted down the penny whistlers returned but asked the white rock 'n' rollers not to dance to their music.) By the early 1960s it was almost impossible for black performers to appear in front of a white audience under any conditions.

The primary effect of apartheid laws on the evolution of music was that they prevented *kwela* and other black musicians from earning a decent income through live performance. By the early 1960s musicians were faced with three choices. They could leave South Africa and try to succeed in Europe or America - some made it and some did not. They could give up music and do something else. In this way South Africa lost many talented musicians. Or they could sign contracts with recording companies where they were exploited financially and retained little control over their musical product.

There are two basic explanations for *kwela*'s rapid rise. First, artists like Spokes Mashiyane, Lemmy Mabaso and the Lerole group achieved the right mix between the expression of aspirant identity for large numbers of fans. Secondly, *kwela* was the first style within the *marabi* tradition to successfully complete the cycle of attraction - imitation - indigenization - recognition that defines the relationship between local and international popular music. *Kwela* was recognised internationally, by white South Africans, and even eventually by the local black elite.

What then accounts for *kwela*'s relatively short-lived career? It only really enjoyed the limelight for five to seven years, whereas most other styles within the *marabi* tradition

held the stage for longer. It was primarily the enforcement of apartheid laws that occurred just as the style reached the height of its recognition that brought about the early fall of *kwela*.

Musicians say that *kwela* became so popular, particularly with white audiences, because busking penny whistle bands kept the music in everybody's ears. So much so that white as well as black South Africans came to regard *kwela* as definitive of their soundscape. In the music industry it is widely believed that people like music that they hear often. This is why recording companies try hard to get radio air play for their releases. When police harassment removed the sound of the penny whistle from the streets, the public quickly forgot.

Musical styles rarely survive forced removal intact. *Marabi* disappeared when Johannesburg's slum yards were cleared in the 1930s. *Kwela* also died with the destruction of its performance space. The streets provided the social context in which *kwela* was born and nurtured. Moved into the studios, penny whistlers took up the saxophone, their guitarists adopted electric instruments, and *kwela* changed into sax jive and then into *mbaqanga*. 14

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