

# THE HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF POPULAR AFRIKAANS MUSIC

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## **A short history of popular Afrikaans music**

If one wants to understand the heritage of popular Afrikaans music, it has to be viewed against the complex sociopolitical backdrop of the development of the language itself. Briefly explained, Afrikaans emerged as a result of the interaction at the Cape between European (mostly Dutch) settlers, the indigenous Khoikhoi and imported Malay slaves, and their descendants over the last three and a half centuries (Roberge 1993). By the mid-nineteenth century, it had become quite distinct from Dutch and was spoken by people diverse in terms of race, class, geography, religion, culture and identity. Developing in a colonial context, racial hierarchies were established and divisions upheld. From a popular music perspective, this diverse cultural heritage saw music sung in Afrikaans and played by musicians from across the racial spectrum (Martin 2012). Dutch and German (and to a lesser extent English) liturgical music and secular songs formed a foundation for songs sung in the new language, while imported minstrel songs from America brought to the colony in the latter part of the nineteenth century added stylistic flavour (Van der Merwe 2015). Also influential were the local indigenous music traditions of the Khoikhoi, as well as those imported from the East by slaves. As a result, the popular music that developed from these sources represented clearly heterogeneous elements. This diversity also forms the basis of fault lines and tensions regarding its heritage.

Popular Afrikaans music is, perhaps, with due consideration given to the dangers of what has become known as ‘South African exceptionalism’, unique in global popular music as the actual language itself (and therefore by extension, its music) developed parallel to global recording technologies. The first Afrikaans newspaper was founded in 1875, just 2 years prior to the invention of the phonograph in 1877. At the turn of the twentieth century, when gramophone records were becoming mass-produced, the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) was raging between Britain and the two independent Boer republics, the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek (commonly known as the Transvaal Republic) and the Republic of the Free State. These two republics were the manifestations of white Afrikaner nationhood, based on a specific linguistic and racial identity. Because of the interest the conflict attracted in Europe at the time, a few sympathetic European singers recorded the national anthems of the two republics in Brussels and The Hague during the war. These were the earliest Africana (sung in Dutch, but relating to Afrikaans) records. The first recordings in actual Afrikaans date to 1906 and were made in London

(Van der Merwe 2015). More recordings followed, almost all of them made by white Afrikaans singers who were studying in London on scholarships, something which was not available to Afrikaans speakers of other races at the time.

The first advertisements for Afrikaans popular music records started to appear in 1910, a few months after the Union of South Africa, which was a merger of the Cape and Natal Colonies with the defeated Boer republics. These early records were advertised in such a way that it played on the tension between Afrikaans and English speakers and appealed to a sense of Afrikaner nationhood. What this meant, ultimately, is that the very first recordings of popular Afrikaans music had close links to a group of white Afrikaans speakers and their aspirations of nationhood. Coloured and black Afrikaans speakers were excluded from these recordings, despite the fact that they had developed vibrant and unique music styles. The first local recordings were made in 1912 by George Walter Dilnutt on his mobile recording unit. More mobile studios arrived in the 1920s, but it was really with the start of the 1930s that the local recording industry took off, partly thanks to hugely successful working-class *boeremusiek* (literally translated ‘farmer’s music’) albums, of which those by singer David de Lange were the most popular. Such records caused tension among class-aware nationalists who, from the 1930s onwards, were intent on co-opting Afrikaner culture as a vehicle for white Afrikaner nationalism. Although these albums were recorded by white musicians, traditional *boeremusiek* represented a complex mixture of the urban and the rural, and of race and class. Developing during the nineteenth century and the early parts of the twentieth, it was regularly performed by coloured labourers for white farmers at their dance parties, just like other types of labour on the farms were designated to them.

Ideologues from nationalist cultural organisations laboured to codify the language and culture to embody a white Afrikaans-speaking *volk* (nation). Part of this project was the publication of a *Volksangbundel* (Folk songbook) by the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge* (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations, or FAK for short) in 1937 with 314 sanctioned Afrikaans songs, ranging from national anthems to picnic songs. Popular Afrikaans music that did not meet the cultural requirements, like that of David de Lange, were deliberately excluded. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) was established in 1936, and from 1937 had a dedicated Afrikaans channel that transformed popular Afrikaans music.

The ushering in of the apartheid era in 1948 heralded fleeting changes for South Africa. Its segregationist laws impacted on music performance in various ways. The destruction of mix-race urban centres like Sophiatown in Johannesburg in the mid-1950s also affected the performance of vibrant music styles like *marabi* jazz and swing by local black musicians. However, during the 1950s, *kwela* music (pennywhistle jive music that emerged among black musicians in and around Johannesburg) became a very popular genre for white recording artists (Allen 2008). Many Afrikaans musicians recorded *kwela*; the most prominent was the accordion virtuoso, Nico Carstens, who managed to sell in excess of a million LPs between 1954 and 1959. This coincided with the introduction of rock music to South Africa in 1956.

Rock had a delayed influence on Afrikaans music. Although (possibly) the earliest Afrikaans song, ‘Gogga’ (an overt reference to The Beatles) dates to 1964, it was only from the late 1970s and early 1980s that Afrikaans music artists started playing rock music in Afrikaans. While abroad rock music had links with the social movements of the 1960s, it had limited impact among South African, including Afrikaans, youth. The 1960s represented the height of apartheid and white Afrikaners mostly accommodated its policies (Van der Merwe 2014). Furthermore, censorship was strict: television was banned until 1976, and generally Afrikaans music remained superficial and heavily influenced by European *Schlager* music. It was only towards the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s that Afrikaans music artists started to question the political status quo. This happened at a time of growing wider discontent with the system of apartheid among

white Afrikaans speakers. The 1980s were tumultuous years as South Africa erupted in widespread violence in the townships, forcing State President P.W. Botha to call a national state of emergency in 1985. White men also started campaigning against conscription, while mostly English bands performed under the banner of the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). Also around this time, early hip hop groups started to form in and around the coloured neighbourhoods of Cape Town, although they remained largely underground. By the end of the decade, alternative Afrikaans rock musicians became staunchly critical of not just the political system but also the conservative white middle class in which they grew up.

In the post-apartheid context, the Afrikaans culture industry has done well. After the state support it received under apartheid was suspended in 1994, it mostly withdrew into corporate hands (Steyn 2016). Dedicated Afrikaans television channels, radio stations, print media, online communities, brand identities and so forth have grown significantly, while Afrikaans arts festivals were established to ensure a vitality in the Afrikaans arts. The Afrikaans music industry has also boomed. Since 2000, a number of artists have passed the 1 million mark in sales in what is a small market. Since 2004, five Afrikaans artists have won the South African Music Award (SAMA) for best-selling local album, while in the 2012/2013 season the five top-selling local albums (of all genres, regardless of language) were Afrikaans (Van der Merwe 2017). However, the top rung of popular Afrikaans artists represent only a specific segment of the Afrikaans-speaking community. A long history of separation has made a lasting impact on commercial Afrikaans music. The mainstream remains overwhelmingly white and caters specifically for its own audience (some, like singer Steve Hofmeyr, have even come to embody right-wing Afrikaner political aspirations), despite the fact that they constitute a minority of first-language Afrikaans speakers. Although one can certainly argue that the Afrikaans recording business is – and always has been – driven by a profit model (aimed mostly at white Afrikaans speakers who have more spending power), it has at times caused friction and drawn accusations of exclusion. As a result, popular Afrikaans music has been included in political debates around linguistic identity, authenticity and the very future of Afrikaans itself.

### **A brief tour of popular Afrikaans music studies**

The field of popular Afrikaans music studies is relatively young when compared to more established counterparts in Europe and the USA, or even wider popular music studies in South Africa itself. When the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) was founded at the first popular music studies conference in Amsterdam in 1981, no academic study had yet been done on popular Afrikaans music. In fact, it was only towards the end of the 1990s, but especially from the early 2000s onwards, that academic work – emanating from a variety of disciplines – on popular Afrikaans music started to appear. One of the first was by Ingrid Byerly (1998), who identified early forms of resistance in popular Afrikaans music and brought it into the wider discussion on late-apartheid South African music. However, to date, very few articles on popular Afrikaans music have appeared in leading journals such as *Popular Music* (one exception is Froneman 2014) or the *Journal of Popular Music*, or in major international collections of work. There is also no local branch of IASPM in South Africa, although SASRIM (the South African Society for Research in Music), which is primarily a society for musicologists, has hosted conferences where papers on popular Afrikaans music have been presented. The newly formed Africa Open Institute for Music Research and Innovation at Stellenbosch University is partly dedicated to the advancement of popular music studies, but popular *Afrikaans* music studies as a ‘field’ is yet to be formally institutionalised at a South African university. There are, of course, historical factors that have delayed and frustrated its development.

The political context of the apartheid era was instrumental in dividing the local attentions of musicologists between Western classical music (as many Afrikaans conservatoires tended to do, thereby also subtly accommodating the dominant narrative of white cultural supremacy) and ethnomusicology involved with local black music that represented various forms of resistance, mostly undertaken by liberal scholars in opposition to apartheid (Lucia 2005, p. xxxv). Thus, while popular music studies were gaining legitimacy abroad and among liberal local scholars (for example Anderson 1981, Coplan 1985), popular *Afrikaans* music was doubly excluded: from within the conservative Afrikaans scholarly community which did not regard it as a legitimate field (reflecting the global stance before the 1980s) to other scholars who regarded it as part of the culture of the oppressor. There was some merit in this assumption, since white Afrikaners as a group had the most invested in apartheid, and popular Afrikaans music often complied with, and reflected, its cultural requirements. There were, however, instances towards the end of apartheid when Afrikaans music artists resisted these requirements, and these were the first to draw academic attention, mostly from outside the field of musicology. The most prominent example of this was the anti-establishment Afrikaans rock music of the 1989 Voëlvrý (literally translated as ‘free as a bird’, or even ‘free penis’) tour. The tour consisted of three acts, headlined by Johannes Kerkorrel (Johnny Church Organ) and the Gereformeerde (‘Reformed’) Blues Band, with Bernoldus Niemand (Bernard Nobody, the working-class alter ego of native English-speaking artist James Phillips) and poet/songwriter André Letoit, who later changed his name to Koos Kombuis (Jacob Kitchen).

Voëlvrý is commonly regarded as the height of political Afrikaans music against a conservative white middle-class Afrikaner society and apartheid politics. Journalist and writer Pat Hopkins (2006) published an authoritative book on Voëlvrý, accompanied by a DVD produced by Shifty Records (a small, progressive record company that recorded, among other things, political music during the 1980s) boss Lloyd Ross. Although perhaps not strictly speaking an *academic* investigation, the book is more than just a documentation of the tour, and Hopkins successfully interrogated the way in which Voëlvrý subverted the deep historical relationship between Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaans music. Koos Kombuis’s *Sex, drugs en boeremusiek* (2000) and *Short drive to freedom* (2009), on the other hand, offer autobiographical accounts of his experiences as part of Voëlvrý. Apart from these books, there is a substantial body of academic articles on Voëlvrý. Jury (1996), Bosman (2004), Grundlingh (2004), Laubscher (2005), Viljoen (2005), Baines (2008) and Suriano and Lewis (2015) have all focused on either the movement directly, or the artists associated with it. Not unlike popular music studies elsewhere, protest singers, poets (through literature studies of their lyrics) and music movements are often explored themes and Voëlvrý embodied all of these.

Apart from Voëlvrý (and distinctly different in what it represented), the hit song ‘De la Rey’ has featured prominently in the literature on popular Afrikaans music. It was released in 2006 by singer Bok (‘Buck’) van Blerk and the album (with the same name) became the fastest selling Afrikaans debut album in history. The song was a reference to Koos De la Rey, a revered Boer general in the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), and the stunning effect of this invocation in post-apartheid South Africa drew much scholarly attention (Du Pisani 2001, Bezuidenhout 2007, Lotter 2007, Baines 2009, Lambrechts and Visagie 2009, van der Waal and Robins 2011, Pretorius 2013). Furthermore, apart from a flood of local newspaper articles, it also featured in UK’s *The Guardian* (McGreal 2007) and *The New York Times* (Wines 2007). Although not groundbreaking in terms of musical style (a slow paced, folky ballad with a 6/8 time signature that is easy to sing along to) ‘De la Rey’ struck a nerve which is of significant importance for the study of post-apartheid Afrikaner identities. It is a controversial song. Some interpret it as a call to arms (McGreal 2007), while others have questioned its play on Afrikaner nostalgia

(Bezuidenhout 2007, Baines 2009, van der Waal and Robins 2011). The song's popularity hinted at a surprisingly high degree of social cohesion among white Afrikaans speakers in the absence of political party platforms. 'De la Rey' provided an opportunity for many to express solidarity with an Afrikaner identity that was rooted in victimhood (the loss of independence in the Anglo-Boer War and the horrors of British concentration camps), instead of relating to the days of being in power (during apartheid). Such nostalgia encodes all sorts of meanings, from rightwing Afrikaners trying to hijack the song as an anthem of white power, to representing a retreat from the wider South African society in which it is felt that Afrikaans as a language and a culture is under threat.

Expanding somewhat on this topic is Senekal and Van den Berg's (2010) lyrical analyses of 62 post-apartheid Afrikaans songs released between 1998 and 2009. The most common themes they identified had to do with crime, service delivery, appeals to stand together and more complex issues surrounding (assumedly white) Afrikaner identity. Under the latter, they included issues surrounding the problematic place of the Afrikaner in South Africa, the new generation positioned between the past and the future, the changing landscape (including Afrikaans place names), the maltreatment of the past and emigration as an alternative. These themes suggest that a number of Afrikaans artists experience a sense of friction within the wider, culturally pluralistic South African society. Stylistically, many of the younger generation of Afrikaans protest singers seem to have continued on a trajectory established by Voëlvry, but since the context has changed so dramatically, so has its meaning. The broader South African public is sensitive to Afrikaner calls 'to stand together' or complaints about crime and the government's inefficiency, and often, whether legitimately or not, see them as the cultural tropes of right-leaning Afrikaners. Deidre Pretorius (2013) has made an important study of stylised representations of masculinity in *Huisgenoot Tempo* magazine (the premier Afrikaans pop magazine). Here, she identified seven stereotypes: *boer*, *metroman*, *sportsman*, *retroman*, *student*, *worker* and *rebel*, all variations of white male identities.

Another more recent phenomenon that has attracted much academic interest is Afrikaans music's biggest export, the *zef* ('common' or working class) rap group, Die Antwoord ('The Answer'). Haupt (2012a) has looked at both Bok van Blerk and Die Antwoord (specifically their use of blackface) while exploring important issues of race and agency in post-apartheid music, media and film. Heavily influenced by coloured and black gangster culture even though they are white, Die Antwoord's appropriation of the cultural practices of the 'other' was discussed in a special roundtable edition in the *Journal of South African and American Studies*, or *Safundi* (Haupt 2012b, Kreuger 2012, O'Toole 2012, Van der Watt 2012). Other articles on Die Antwoord have also appeared elsewhere that focus on issues of authenticity, whiteness, cultural appropriation and the like (Marx and Milton 2011, Scott 2012, Haupt 2013, Smit 2015). Haupt is a leading author on South African hip hop and has focused especially on its development around coloured neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Cape Town from the 1980s onwards, and how it has encoded issues of power, authenticity, race, identity and language. Often rapping in vernacular Afrikaans, these artists portray an alternative type of popular Afrikaans music that stands outside the standard space where mainstream white popular Afrikaans music, with its exclusive and insular nature, dominates. They also represent deep-rooted fault lines among the various first language Afrikaans-speaking communities. Haupt (2006) has also addressed the motives behind Afrikaans arts festivals that invite coloured Afrikaans groups to perform there. He questions whether or not these are acts of buying legitimacy, and furthermore, if coloured artists are only acceptable (and thereby given access) if they perform music that caters for the tastes of white Afrikaans speakers.

Whereas the literature on Voëlvry, 'De la Rey' and Die Antwoord is very specifically focused, there has been a number of works that have employed a broader scope. The widest

is *On Record: Popular Afrikaans Music and Society, 1900–2017* (Van der Merwe 2017), which provides a historical take on salient themes in the entire history of recorded Afrikaans music to the present, starting with the first Africana and Afrikaans records. Rob Allingham, archivist of the Gallo Record Company (an important South African label that has released a trove of local music since 1930, including very popular early *boeremusiek* records), was the first to provide a summary of the history of popular Afrikaans music, in the African, European and Middle Eastern section in *World Music: The Rough Guide* (Allingham 1999). Although a potted version, he did manage to highlight many important historical themes such as the influence of imported American music on the ‘concertina-led brand of dance-music’ of the 1930s (a reference to *boeremusiek*), the ubiquitous background of Afrikaner nationalism, the post-war imitation of middle-of-the-road European light music styles, the emergence of alternative Afrikaans music during the 1980s and 1990s, and the link between music revivalists and right-wing politics after 1994 (Allingham 1999, p. 651).

Denis-Constant Martin’s *Sounding the Cape* (2012) is a notable work that provides a long historical account of the social complexities that played on the development of music traditions in and around Cape Town and beyond. It pays proper attention to the enormous cultural contributions of coloured and black musicians across a variety of genres and also highlights the role of racial segregation in breaking musical relations that have historically transcended such boundaries. Although it is not specifically focused on Afrikaans music, a large part of the study includes Afrikaans music elements that have emerged in this setting. Importantly, the book bridges the lasting insularity that persists in the music industry to give a comprehensive and balanced view of the music of the Cape. Another important study is Froneman’s ethnomusicological work on *boeremusiek* (2012), which is of special significance for the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, when it was one of the most popular genres of recorded Afrikaans music. The literature on *boeremusiek* actually has a longer history. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, nationalist intellectuals wrote numerous papers and articles and made regular speeches on whether or not *boeremusiek* resembled an authentic Afrikaans folk tradition. They were especially interested in the cultural value of the genre and how to preserve it against foreign influences like jazz. These were, however, written from a nationalist angle and subscribed to the dominant narrative of racial segregation and hierarchies of apartheid. Froneman succeeds in portraying the position of *boeremusiek* as a juncture between race, class, religion, morality, politics, power and identity, and is authoritative. Klopper’s (2009) dissertation on the Afrikaans punk rock band, Fokofpolisiekar (‘Fuck off police car’), is authoritative and provides a lyrical analysis of this hugely influential group’s work. Klopper (2011) also published a biography on the band for a wider, less academic, readership.

There are also other popular works, like Danie Pretorius’ *Musieksterre van gister en vandag: Lewensketse En Foto’s Van Meer as 100 Musieksterre* (‘Music stars of yesterday and today: life sketches and photos of more than 100 music stars’; Pretorius 1998) and Ilza Roggeband’s *50 Stemme: Die grootste name in Afrikaanse musiek* (‘50 voices: the biggest names in Afrikaans music’; Roggeband 2009) that provide biographic and discographic information about prominent Afrikaans singers. Another example is the 2003 documentary, *Kom laat ons sing* (‘Come let us sing’), presented and co-produced by singer Laurika Rauch (Rauch *et al.* 2003). Here, the main focus was on *Musiek-en-Lirieke* (‘Music and Lyric’), a television programme aired in 1979 that heralded a new phase in Afrikaans music. Although more folk than overtly political, some subtle resistance started to emerge in the music. The documentary also provided a wider historical perspective on popular Afrikaans music, including the manner in which apartheid censorship prohibited a lot of music innovation and how the post-apartheid era represents a time of liberation. The South African music industry during apartheid was indeed subject to strict censorship, mostly written about by Merrett (1994) and Drewett and Cloonan (2006). This had a direct

impact on the production of popular music, including popular Afrikaans music. The SABC used extremely subjective measures to determine which songs could be broadcast or not. As political tension increased during the 1980s, so did the power and intensity of censorship.

It is clear that, although a relatively new field, the literature on popular Afrikaans music stems from numerous disciplines and is growing at a rapid pace. There is, however, still much room and scope for studies on, for example, Afrikaans music videos, postmodernity in popular Afrikaans music, issues of gender, its role in mass Afrikaner culture and the relationship between music and technology. In terms of archives, most South African university libraries have music collections that range from ethnic to Western art music, and in some cases also popular music. However, archival material of specifically popular Afrikaans music is more limited. An important archive is the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at Stellenbosch University, which houses the personal archives of influential Afrikaans artists like Anton Goosen and Nico Carstens. DOMUS also houses the Hidden Years Music Archive Project (HYMAP), which is a vast collection of material (live recordings, albums, ephemera) documenting the popular music scene in South Africa between 1960 and 2005, and is currently being sorted. It is one of the best sources of information on popular music performance in South Africa during apartheid. The radio archives of the SABC in Johannesburg hold numerous transcription records (many in Afrikaans), censored albums (of which offending tracks were scratched out) and the like, and although it is not all sorted, it remains an important source. The Gallo Record company has an archive in Johannesburg, but it is currently (as far as can be ascertained) not curated and difficult to access. One of the more useful online sources is the South African Audio Archive (2017), which features audio clips and visuals donated by private collectors. The oldest Afrikaans recording on the site dates to 1912. Another useful online resource is the South African Rock Encyclopaedia (2017), which focuses on local rock in both English and Afrikaans. A welcome new venture is the Music van de Caab Museum on the Solms-Delta wine farm in Franschhoek which aims at showcasing the music heritage of the Cape, which is in line with the farm's broader policy of empowering farm workers and celebrating their cultural roots. This is important in a wider context of not just preserving, but re-discovering, aspects of coloured Afrikaans music heritage that fall outside the popular mainstream. If one looks at more modern manifestations of such linguistic and racial identities in Afrikaans music (mostly hip hop), artists like Jitsvinger (who performs in an Afrikaans dialect called Afrikaaps), Churchill Naudé and Hemelbesem are notable names. The history of popular Afrikaans music is a rich one and part of a tumultuous and complex past. It is an especially relevant topic when it comes to determining the contours, or looking for indications of, social cohesion (and tension) among its various speakers.

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