

South Africa: Apartheid, anthropology and Johnny Clegg

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All that French marketing schtick aside about “the white Zulu,” Johnny Clegg was a real one.

Johnny Clegg, the South African musician, best known for his band Juluka, died at his home in Johannesburg on July 16. Most people know Clegg from his album *Scatterlings* (1982), which can still be found in the “world music” section of most second-hand music shops, or from his 1986 anti-apartheid song “Asimbonanga,” which pays tribute to Mandela and fallen struggle heroes. He was also a trained anthropologist, who used his training to develop a unique hybridized sound that challenged the apartheid state’s political manipulation of culture.

Growing up in middle-class white South Africa in the late 1990s, Clegg’s music was the background to my childhood and captured much of the optimism of the time. Understandably, as one of the few white musicians who performed in an African language, his music has been associated with the “rainbowism” of this period. While his songs do celebrate a non-racial humanism, they also capture the violent colonial histories that lurk beneath rolling hills and open veldt.

In the song “[Mdantsane \(Mud Coloured Dusty\)](#),” for example, he is asked:

Why don’t you sing about the African moon?
Why don’t you sing about the leaves and the dreams?
Why don’t you sing about the rain and the birds?

In the next verse, he answers. Because, while on the road to the township of Mdantsane, he saw, “mud coloured dusty blood/ bare feet on a burning bus/ broken teeth and rifle butt.” Mdantsane is a township in the Eastern Cape outside East London, established in the early 1960s under the Group Areas Act to house black residents evicted from urban townships in the city. As a child, I grew up driving along the same road, usually to go to the beach on family trips. Blinkered by the myopia and cultural provincialism of white South Africa, it would take me years to understand the violence embedded in these landscapes. In a sense, this was the aim of Clegg’s music, to not merely celebrate the natural beauty of South Africa but to situate it in relation to histories of war, migration and hope for a better future.

Apartheid and Censorship

Juluka’s songs were not overtly political. This is to say that while they thematically touched on colonial histories, worker repression and struggle figures, they were not traditional protest songs. While some songs ([Asimbonanga](#), for instance) were banned for political reasons, the real threat that Clegg and Juluka posed to apartheid was the free and open association of black and white artists.

The mixing of languages and cultures posed a threat to apartheid's attempt at creating a Manichean social order.

Apartheid was not only a system of racial segregation, but a form of enforced cultural balkanization. Different ethnic and language groups were seen as discrete and unchanging, with African culture and language, in particular, seen as a relic of an ancient past that needed to be shielded from western modernity. This saw the establishment of distinct ethnic homelands and forms of media production and control for each group.

Starting in the early 1960s, the state turned its attention to the control of publications and music. Control over music was controlled through government ownership of the airwaves and a government censorship board. The Bantu Programme Control Board was formed in the 1960s to oversee radio programming for black South Africans on the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The SABC was divided into multiple stations that catered to each particular language group, and official policy dictated that languages were not to be mixed.

It was for this reason that the first Juluka song to be censored by the apartheid state was a pop song that celebrated romantic love at the end of the work week. In 1976, Juluka released their first album [Ubhle Bemvelo](#), which included the track [Woza Friday](#). The song included a mix of English and Zulu lyrics, including the lines 'Woza, woza, Friday my darling; Woza, woza Friday my sweetie.' The white head of Zulu radio told the band that they should have either used all Zulu or all English, mixing Zulu and English was declared an insult to the Zulu people. The comment reveals the state's cynical manipulation of culture for political ends, and how censorship was justified under the guise of maintaining the "integrity" of African culture. In another example of this, Pietersburg town council (today Polokwane in Limpopo Province) banned Juluka from performing in the city limits due to the band's corruption of western culture by mixing it with African culture.

As Clegg points out in [a book chapter](#) he co-wrote on Juluka and censorship, this ignored the fact that the version of isiZulu spoken by most people in the country bore little resemblance to a classical Zulu free from western influence. As a spoken language, Zulu in the 1970s, particularly its urban dialect, was already a patois as many South African languages are. The notion of African languages as frozen and emblematic of some romanticized past ignores the dynamism of culture and language.

While control of the airwaves was one mode of censorship, a more direct one was simply police harassment. In the 1970s and 80s white performers were supposed to apply for a permit to perform in townships. Many, including Juluka, did not do so out of principal, which gave police reason to shut down the show. In a Juluka show in Duduza township on the East Rand, for example, three undercover police officers came onto the stage with shotguns, grabbed the microphone and declared the show over. There is also evidence that Clegg and Juluka were subject to police surveillance. Apartheid security branch office Paul Erasmus revealed to researcher Michael Drewett that the branch had a personal file on Clegg. It seems likely that surveillance intensified in the mid-1980s as Clegg came to play a prominent role in the South African Musicians Association, which helped enforce the cultural boycott of South Africa.

While Clegg and Juluka were not overtly political in the way that other apartheid artists were—they did not play ANC fundraisers or align themselves with any particular political faction, they were deeply threatening to the cultural hegemony of the apartheid state. By hybridizing African and western music, they publicly challenged the ideology of racial and cultural separation. They also allowed many South Africans to glimpse a post-apartheid future in which opportunity, friendship and culture would not be narrowly defined by race or ethnicity.

The Anthropologist

Clegg was an anthropologist long before enrolling as a student at Wits University in Johannesburg where he earned a BA and worked alongside the anthropologist and activist [David Webster](#) (later assassinated by an Apartheid death squad). At the age of 14, he visited migrant worker compounds in Johannesburg where he learned to play guitar in the Zulu maskanda style. He visited shebeens and townships around the city, watching Zulu dances and listening to musicians sing about home, movement and work—all themes that permeate his music. Through his friendship with Juluka member Siphso Mchunu, he developed a rich knowledge of both the Zulu language and its musical heritage.

But Clegg's anthropology did not end merely at observation, he used these experiences to develop a hybridized art that challenged cultural and racial essentialism. In an interview published in *Anthropology Southern Africa*, he describes his ongoing discomfort with narrow racial and cultural categories. "Culture is form of coding reality. Codes are constantly changing as each new generation brings in a new way of coding." The role of the anthropologist, he notes, is to decode this social world, to make sense of the views, systems and practices that place boundaries around identities and practices. In doing so, we "facilitate a communication, understanding and celebration of everyone's endeavor... We take out of this a deep understanding of what it is to be human."

Clegg's personal and musical journey was a pursuit of a humanist universal culture, one that refused the narrow boundaries of racial and cultural essentialism. It was an attempt at using anthropology as performative practice, to not only decode and interpret but to communicate common hopes and struggles. "Anthropology tells us that before all culture is human culture," he says, "There exists a different expression of the same human need. We are all involved in one project."

Chris Webb

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