

Born Coloured : Not 'Born-Free'

Culminating Experience Project - Benjamin Jephtha

Culminating experience summary

For my culminating experience I to delve into my experience as a so-called 'Coloured' in post-Apartheid, democratic South Africa. I dissect my experience and created music centred around important themes. These themes included '*transformation*', '*the coloured identity*', '*the coloured and black relationship*' and '*the coloured mentality*'.

My aim is to inspire and create a sense of hope, empowerment and unity in the South African experience, rather than alienating with a radical political approach. The compositions draws musically from traditional South African styles such as the Ghoema/Cape Jazz and Marabi music as well as modern African music idioms such as Gqom (a style of 'house' music), kwaito and hip-hop.

Preface

In South Africa I am considered both coloured and born-free. Coloured is a racial classification given to me by an apartheid government and 'born free' refers to the to people born after 1994 into a 'supposed' free and racially undivided democratic South Africa.

During Apartheid, all South Africans were classified into one of four racial groups based on appearance, ethnicity, culture and socioeconomic status. Namely: 'Black', 'White', 'Coloured' and 'Indian'. This was enforced by the Population Registration Act of 1950.

The term 'Coloured' is used to classify people of mixed heritage that includes European, Asian and indigenous people of Southern Africa (Khoisan) lineage. These racial classifications were used to create false divisions which perpetuated a hierarchy, used to separate people socially, economically and politically. Today, in a democratic South Africa, these divisions are still used and accepted.

In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections after Apartheid was abolished in the early 1990s. I was born in 1992 and consequently am considered to be part of the 'Born-Free' generation. This refers to youth born into a free and racially undivided South Africa. Yet we still subscribe to a 'race-model' implemented by a colonial Apartheid regime – a model used to create an economically and socially unequal country.

Does being born 'Coloured' mean I can never truly be 'born-free'?

For a long time, I have embraced that term. However, the uncertainty of my mixed heritage, culture and traditions as well as this blanket term used to describe something as complex as race, obscured the way I saw myself in a supposedly democratic country. I have also become more aware of how 'we' interact in our society and how 'we' are viewed by fellow South Africans. These stereotypes have manifested into the socio-economic marginalization of coloured people.

In this project I show how democratic South Africa still subscribing to the term 'Coloured' has caused an obscured social identity and developed into a coloured mentality of low-self-concept and destructive thinking.

Plan of action

As far as my compositional approach: It's in my nature to do things intuitively so when writing the music for this project I spent a lot of time really trying to understand the subject and made choices regarding melodies, harmonic colours and grooves mostly based on feeling.

I also took an 'electronically produced' approach with some material as this informs my musical manifesto of a modern approach to the tradition. Some of the musicians I drew influences from include, but is not exclusive to: Terence Blanchard, Christian Scott, Zim Ngqawana, Abdullah Ibrahim, Derrick Hodge, Moses Molelekwa, Afrika Mkhize, Keith Jarrett, Tribe, Mark Fransman, TkZee, Kaytranada and many more.

I started composing the music in November 2018 while taking Bruno Raburg's 'The Composing Performer' class. While reading and viewing material related to the subject matter, I slowly started to develop some musical material based on how I felt and understood things. At this point in time I did not know what themes I wanted to centre the work around.

Around April 2019 I decided on the most important themes and I developed the musical sketches around these into complete works. These themes included '*transformation*', '*the coloured identity*', '*the coloured and black relationship*' and '*the coloured mentality*'.

I arranged the music for a septet which included: piano, drums, percussion, electric & double bass, trumpet/flugel horn, alto saxophone and tenor sax/flute.

i. Transformation

'An Incomplete Transition'

When talking about post-Apartheid South Africa we have to speak about the how the lack of complete transformation has led to a fragile unequal society between racial/class groups. In a recent study by the world bank group they found that South Africa is the most economically unequal country and that racial inequality is one of the prominent factors behind this. With *'An Incomplete Transition'* I used this harmonically ambiguous piano ostinato to create the expectation of something promised, but never being delivered.

I included a quote by social commentator Dr Leonard Martin talking about abolishing notions of race to complete the transformation process.

"Racialism is a deep decease in our social political fabric; and for the next generations, the responsibility of our leaders in this generation is to clear the ground in order for a healthy humanity to take place. To redesign, reconfigure our social space in order for that equality and also human self-respect to begin to grow again"

ii. The Coloured Identity

'The Ben-Dhlamini stomp'

Because the coloured identity is not homogenous, classifying a multiethnic group under one label creates problems in the way we see ourselves as well as how our society views us. With this theme I wanted to specifically focus on a part of our identity that

often gets denied. Our Africanism. Already in the population registration act (1950) we are seen as 'not Native'. Our Black African Identity is important since this leads to our social-economic marginalization when it comes to reparations post-Apartheid.

The song '*Ben-Dhlamini stomp*' was inspired by recent protests in South Africa by 'The First Nation Movement', a group reclaiming their African history and advocating against for the socio-economic exclusion of Coloured, Khoi San, and Mixed-race people.

Personally, I've often battled with my own identity as an African. Through many conversations, especially one with Randy Weston in his Brooklyn home in 2016 talking about his love and connection to Africa, as well as this book by Sylvia Vollenhoven called '*Keeper of the Kumm*' in which she speaks about finding belonging by listening to messages from your ancestors in you DNA, I have decided that:

*Firstly, I am **African**,*

*Politically I am **Black**, as a protest against this colonial classification,*

*And Culturally I am **Coloured**.*

The name *Ben-Dhlamini* comes from a nickname I was given by some of the black musicians in South Africa which combines my name with a Nguni name by way of acknowledging my Black African identity. I attempted to combine these identities together in a protest song or stomp which is created by a piano and bass ostinato figure

iii. The Coloured and Black relationship

'Klopse Kwaito'

The created identities of Coloured and Black was part of an apartheid “divide and rule” strategy was meant to inhibit the development of political alliances. Relations between the two groups are frequently based on a perceived lack of similarity and a heightened awareness of difference.

With Kwaito Klopse I plan to musically show how we are more alike than we are different by fusing the grooves of 2 music traditions, namely the Klopse tradition and Kwaito music as well as highlighting South Africa’s love for dance and dance music by creating a dance track. Klopse is a minstrel tradition born out of the Abolishment of the Cape Slave trade and is similar to the Mardi Gras tradition in New Orleans. Kwaito music is a variant house music which features the use of African styles with electronic samples. It emerged in the black townships of Johannesburg, South Africa, during the 1990s.

From these two grooves I developed this my own groove in 5/4, which is held together with Danilo’s 5/4 clave. The bass and piano parts imply a 4 over 5 feel but separated by an 8th note. I merged the Klopse and Kwaito kick and snare pattern and the melody that is simply is taken from a pentatonic scale, characteristic of the African diaspora.

iv. **The Coloured Mentality**

'Born Coloured – not 'Born-free' (*3 part suite*)

This was by far the most interesting part of my research. To understand Coloured people's attitude towards South Africa I looked at the '*The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB)*' which is a survey used to measure citizens' attitudes toward social cohesion and transformation. To understand how that attitude manifests I also looked at race-based statistics within South Africa.

What I found is that there is a cycle perpetuating a coloured mentality of a low self-thinking. It starts with a **sense of marginalization**, leading to **minimal class mobility**, then **disillusionment in the current administration** which leads to and an **obscured social identity** which then develops this **low self-concept** and **destructive thinking**, evident in many statistics I found: high levels of gangsterism, drug abuse, incarceration rate, homicide rate, unemployment and a 41% Poverty Rate.

Born Coloured; not 'Born-free' reflects my hope for the self-empowerment of Coloured people by breaking free from an Apartheid mentality that was meant diminish their self-worth. It is in three parts; *Acceptance, Metamorphosis and Resurgence*

Acceptance

'Acceptance of who we are and what we came from, and this starts with a dialogue.'

Musically I portray this by creating a unified statement upfront to set the tone for what is still to come

Metamorphosis

'The process of ridding the apartheid mentality to give rise to a better sense of self.'

This lament features a cyclic melody that grows with intensity as an underscore to a bass solo. I drew from the South African choral tradition as three voices enter independently to create one unified sound

Resurgence

'Reconfiguring the way people see themselves to negate the terms we were defined by.'

It starts with a piano ostinato featuring a hopeful undertone that expands harmonically, but the melody remains constant. The melody is simple and moves parallel between the three horns with the lead in the alto. The horns play rhythmically loose and make use of vibrato and glissandos to give it a vocal-like quality characteristic of the 'Cape Jazz' idiom.

Results

This a conclusion I've come to regarding the coloured experience in South Africa:

*"I do believe that the racial inequality in South Africa is **not** specifically a coloured issue, but we cannot deny peoples lived experience. What makes this issue important to me, is that here we have people that has been denied their **history** and their **place** in South Africa. They are **trapped** in terms of class and social mobility and as a minority*

*community, they are often **overlooked**. Going forward, Coloured people will have to **reimagine** an identity that is not just stereotypical, but allows for different **possibilities**. What's important for us as Black and Coloured South Africans is to understand these multiplicity of identities through **dialogue**, so that we become aware of all the different parts that make up our **being** and **culture**.”*

Through research and musical practice this year at the Berklee Global Jazz Institute I'm starting to make more connections between my humanity and musical expression. I've become more passionate about my role as not only a musician but an activist and this has subsequently informed the way I express myself musically. My focus has shifted from just being a good musician to be a good person and through confronting my own prejudices and empathic practice I'm really excited about the many possibilities that now lies ahead of me.

How the work contributes to the profession

What I plan on doing musically is similar to what South African pianist Moses Taiwa Molelekwa did. He managed to fuse his jazz approach with traditional South African music as well as modern popular styles with a more electronically produced approach. His approach to the music seems to be the driving force behind many of young South African musicians at the moment. Attempting to live in both the past, present and future simultaneously.

To date, I am not aware of any musical work that is centred specifically around Coloured Identity issues in South Africa.

Next steps

My future plans include continuing to develop my musical identity through this research. I would also like to continue to experiment with composition as well as the 'zero gravity' playing concept spoken about at the institute I also have plans to record more music with South African musicians and release this work as an album next year

I'd like to present a longer detailed version of this presentation to the public, especially at schools and conferences centred around race/class and social justice. At the moment I see it as an 1hr 30min presentation with a live band component

After seeing the impact music has to evoke social change this year at the institute, I have have a long-term project that involves developing a music program specifically at tertiary level in Cape Town that is based on the 'Global Jazz Institute' model. This will be developed together with a music therapist with the aims of expanding the potential of musicians and Instilling a sense of Social justice within their musical ethics.

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