

# MUSIC & Censorship

## IN APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA



### ROUNDTABLE

## *The Censored Meet Their Censor*

Moderator: Mr. Ole Reitov,  
Editor, Danish Broadcasting  
Corporation.

MR. SIPHO MABUSE and Mr. Ray Phiri, musicians from South Africa, in a first face to face meeting with former censor, Ms. Cecil Pracher, Manager of the record library at South African Broadcasting Corporation. The tone of the roundtable is frank, sometimes affective; and is followed by an open discussion.



## Overview (Ole Reitov):

We start with South Africa - and why that? Many people say that there is no problem in South Africa anymore. The interesting thing about South Africa is that we have very strong personalities who have suffered for many years. But also, people who want to move on. People also know that we can now see the long term effects of censorship. This session is an attempt to try to understand how censorship affects people in their creativity and it is also an attempt to understand how you work within a system when you are censoring music.

I am very happy to invite three wonderful people to the podium here: Ray Phiri is a very distinguished musician who struggled for many years in South Africa. It took Paul Simon's *Graceland* to make him world famous but those who knew his music and his group, 'Stimela,' before that, knew that we had a star of world fame.

I would also like to introduce another wonderful musician: Sipho Mabuse. His album, *Chant of the Marching*, was banned in 1992. You should always start with presenting the women but I would actually like to present Cecile at the end here.

Cecile Pracher is a very special woman. She worked at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for many years. She worked in the music library. When I got access to the archives of South African Broadcasting Corporation in August, Cecile was the lady who was hospitable to let me in and showed how music had been censored. We had long conversations on this. We had hoped to have another guest here, Anton Goosen, the foremost Afrikaan singer of South Africa. What exactly happened we don't know, it seems like he missed his flight. So unfortunately Anton is not here, we only have his voice. Let's start by listening to Anton:

We had a bomb at a big concert and in 1989 to 1990 the security police followed us. They knew what we were doing. They were listening to conversations between me and my girlfriend on the phone, sometimes interacting making their own little remarks. We were watched, but then after a while they realised that we were innocent, that we were only preaching cultural things. With Barbara Masekela<sup>1</sup> returning to the country there was a

spy in my own band. Not only one there were two of them. The drummer was an ex-security police and his job was to get information from the Conservative Party's diaries. The other spy was the girlfriend — the guitarist's girlfriend. She was working for National Intelligence. She is still working for National Intelligence, but for the new set. How can you trust people like that? There were bomb threats and other threats at concerts as well.

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, did you ever have spies in your band?

**Ray Phiri:** I'd say somebody who died

**Somebody just decided that what you sing is undesirable without letting you know why your song was being banned. I am still hurting inside because I just want to know what it is that makes censorship....**

when I had an accident in 1997. Later on we discovered that it was planned. He was the manager of the group and it was sad because I trusted him with all my life. He knew so much about where we were coming from and where we were getting to. After the accident the truth came out that he was part of it.

**Ole Reitov:** Were you ever so dangerous that it was needed to have spies within the band?

**Ray Phiri:** I guess all in all in any society that is ruled by fear you do get such elements whereby you end up not even trusting your spouse. I ended up having about three places to stay so I never knew where I was going to wake up the next day. It proved to be too expensive trying to run away so that no one catches up with you.

**Ole Reitov:** Sipho, how does it affect the creativity of musicians when there is censorship?

**Sipho Mabuse:** It is obvious that censorship does affect all creative people in different ways. We obviously have experienced censorship in our respective countries differently



from whatever sources they would come. I can only speak about how it affected us in South Africa (SA) as writers because censorship was based on ideological differences rather than creativity. So, we as creative people were more affected by what our government of the day deemed to be dangerous to society. We had to find ways in which to circumvent the problem by writing songs in different ways.

**Ole Reitov:** Cecile, within the SABC there were specific rules on dos and what was not allowed. Could you tell about what those rules were?

**Cecile Pracher:** The lyrics of each and every pop item had to be checked on grounds stemming from the Publication Board of SA by law. Our rules were more defined than those of the government. Things like, for example, swear words were unacceptable. Unacceptable sexual references were to be avoided, bad taste, any occult elements in the lyrics were unacceptable, lyrics propagating the usage of drugs, blasphemy, glorification of the devil, unfair promotion of a political party or movement and so it goes on and on. So it had a lot to do with interpretation as well.

**Ole Reitov:** In the Bible you need ten commandments. How many commandments did you need in SABC?

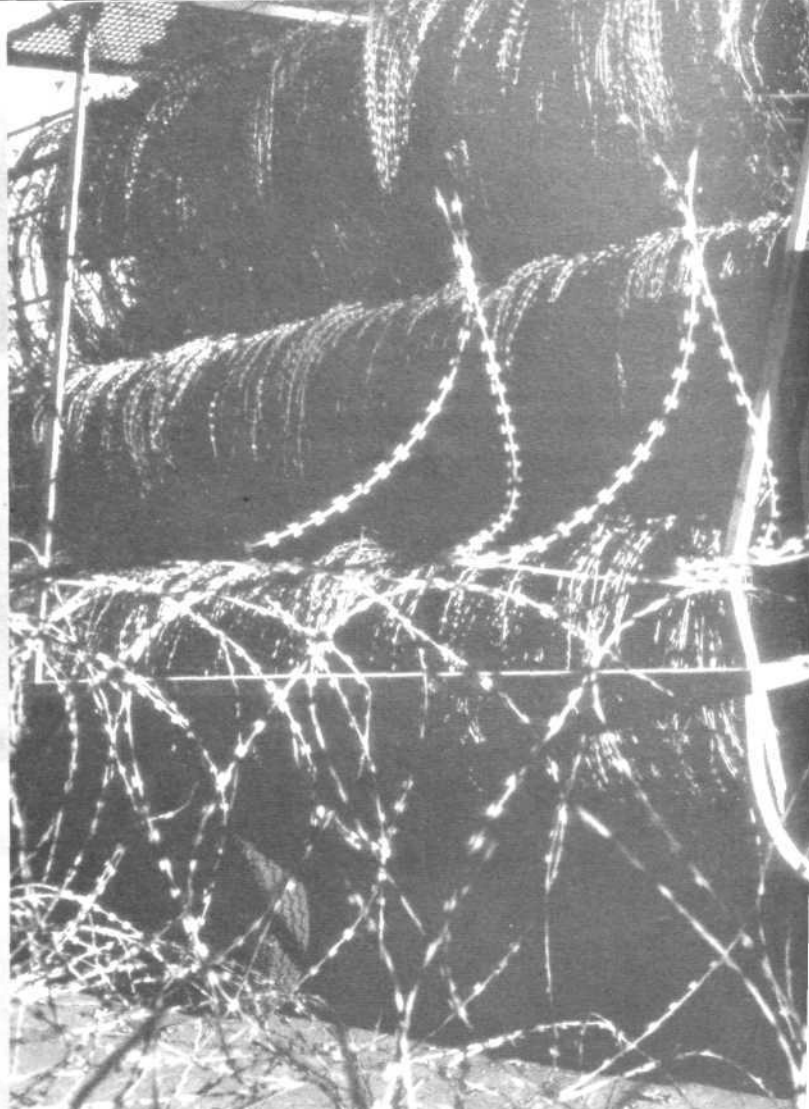
**Cecile Pracher:** At the time I was there, between the 1980s and 1990s, it was the time of P.W. Botha and Apartheid was in full swing and the state of emergency was declared and everything became tighter and tighter. Things that would have been allowed five years earlier were frowned upon; therefore, it was a very unnatural society to live in.

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, could you tell us about the daily life as a touring artist in SA in those days? What kind of restrictions would you meet on tour?

**Ray Phiri:** Before that I would like to ask Cecile something. Did banning of songs include working with someone of other color? I am still confused, because one of my songs was banned because I sang with a white person. Was that undesirable?

**Cecile Pracher:** I am not quite sure which song you are referring to. Not to my knowledge on those grounds, but I stand to be corrected.

**Ray Phiri:** It may have been earlier be-



fore you started working. It was a song called, "Where Did We Go Wrong", which I sang with a lady called Kathy Pannington.

**Ole Reitov:** What you are saying is that when things were banned you never got an explanation, is that correct?

**Ray Phiri:** Yes, that hurt a lot. You did not know whether you're wrong or not and it stifled the growth of a creative person. It simply took away your dignity as a human being, whereby you did not even know if you were doing the right thing or not. Somebody just decided that what you sing is undesirable without letting you know why your song was being banned. I am still hurting inside because I just want to know what it is that makes censorship members decide what is desirable and what is not. So we can also learn to understand how we can help others not to go through what we went through.

**Ole Reitov:** Cecile, could you tell us about how different political periods would influence the way you would have to censor in SABC.

**Cecile Pracher:** I would say it depended very much on what time we are referring to. But I think if we talk about between the 1970s and the 1990s, the guidelines I gave you were to be interpreted by the heads of department of radio and TV in the broadcast environment. We did not have an open airwave in the sense that they were only two independent broadcasts and they belonged to the state broadcaster, which was the SABC. Therefore, this committee consisted of all heads of department and lyrics were scrutinized before hand by the manager in the record library, which in this case was me, before it was somebody else. Those lyrics would be passed onto meeting once a week. In the years between 1980 and 1990, there were generally about 15 lyrics per week. If you take into account that we only in those days had about 480 LPs or CDs that came in per year, then it was quite a substantial amount of lyrics that had to be checked and had to be voted upon. The voting system was open, and my impression was that in those days virtually anything that was perceived as damaging to the state, to the SABC, or to the National Party was regarded as not acceptable and we would ban it.

**Ole Reitov:** Sipho, you are not only a musician, you are obviously also a consumer of music. How did that period affect you as a consumer of music, access to music—to understand the music not only of SA but the rest of the world?

**Sipho Mabuse:** Well, fortunately for me I was more in an advantage because I was always traveling. So, as a consumer, I was not affected that much by not having music accessible to me. But it made it a bit difficult because the freedom for one to be able to access that music was curtailed by the fact that one always had to smuggle the music into the country. Because if you didn't smuggle the music there were no other ways that one could hear it. So, in a way, it made it difficult for many people at home to listen to music they felt they wanted to listen to. But at the same time, we would have wanted to hear most of the music that was written by South African musicians whom we felt had an influence on the socio-political environment in

SA. And because of the censorship we just did not have access to that type of music. So we did not know and we were not given reasons why that music was not available to us.

**Ole Reitov:** How did that influence you as an artist because when the market was restricted, did you have to think more commercially? For you personally, how did this affect your creativity?

**Sipho Mabuse:** As creative people we were guided by principles and of course consciousness. One had to make decisions as to whether you live pretending that nothing is wrong or you let your voice be heard as part of what was going on in SA. You have to understand that SA was in a repressive stage at a particular time, and more so that stage affected quite a number of people—not only musicians but the society as a whole including some white people who were opposed to the system of apartheid. Somehow, we had to find a way in which we convey such messages in our songs and we would normally use street language to communicate.

We would write songs in such a way that the officials could not detect what we meant in our songs. Because anything that would be seen as subversive would somehow be banned by the SABC, which was the only form of communicating our music to the public. I remember writing a song called "Set Me Free", the intention of this song was obvious but the contents meant something else and of course people in the townships understood exactly where we were because of the political state of the time.

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, you were talking about dignity before. Was it a cant feeling that someone is stepping on my dignity?

**Ray Phiri:** I would just like to say, life is a precious gift and anything that constricts life is evil. The closest thing to religion happens to be music. When a child is born, at the celebration people are singing. At the funeral, we sing hymns, so music plays a very important role in our lives and society's norms also. If in trying to educate or help society to find itself you are denied that right, you suppress what you feel and what you see. Each and every song is based either on your personal experiences or what society is going through. They influence your way of thinking and writing. So

immediately when you are not given the right to even express yourself, then you start undermining yourself. It's like somebody is tramping on your dignity, you are a non-person and you start doubting yourself, your confidence simply crumbles. But at some point in time, heroes get born at that point which happens to be a no return point, the dignity corner where you go and look for some reflection of your people.

As a people inside SA, we needed a vision but we had no right to that vision, so it came back to loosing a little bit of your confidence and dignity, dying a bit. You were lucky to go through that little gap that was there. I think that censorship in its whole entirety is evil. It takes away the spirit of being a human being. It doesn't free you from the shackles of depression. You end up being so depressed up to the point of no return where you don't put value into your being a contributor to life.

Ole Reitov: Cecile, could you tell about the system that surrounded you as a white Afrikaaner. Ray was talking about music and religion. How did religion affect your way of thinking and giving you the possibility and right to censor?

**Cecile Pracher:** The Afrikaaner at the time was a Calvinistic religious follower and most of the way they were thinking derived from that point of departure. They unfortunately only looked after themselves and therefore everybody not towing the line as far as everything was concerned, was not part of the government, its structures or its people, or for that matter they weren't really the true South Africans. Therefore, they had to be white and any other color was subservient. At the time of the state of emergency, everything was clouded and got more depressed. Rules were strictly applied and people were thrown into jail. I think it's also the time where the struggle got tremendous momentum as the momentum grew and the opposite parties started talking to one another; they clamped down on all laws. Regulations became harder and harder. In that surrounding, the rules that we had to apply in the SABC as far as lyrics were concerned, obviously went by the same token also stricter. If I read the lyrics now I sometimes find it rather weird and you can actually see where it comes from.

It was a frightened society. It was frightened if you were part of the struggle, and it was also obviously on the other side much worse I would imagine. I thought I would bring you Siphos record at the time, which we banned.

Records weren't banned by the SABC as a record with all the cuts. It was normally one, two or three cuts—but sometimes it was eight, nine or ten. But, it was about three or four cuts and we had to put on stickers onto the LP's and in fact some of the LPs were scratched so

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that those cuts weren't played. With CD's of course that opportunity was lost. I thought I'd show you the record of Siphos for interest sake. (Shows the audience the record). On the back the different cuts which were banned at the time were: "Chant", "Room of Horror" and "Refugee".

**Siphon Mabuse:** What about Mandela's song?



**Cecile Pracher:** I'm sorry; I missed that one (laughter).

**Siphon Mabuse:** There's a song about Mandela here, because we called for the release of Nelson Mandela and I'm surprised that they didn't ban it, but I know they didn't play it.

**Cecile Pincher:** To be honest, I think there was a time in the late 1980s when the word Mandela meant that you had to look twice at the lyrics. Whether it was positive in their eyes or negative. It was mostly 'free Mandela' and I think music is a wonderful way of carrying a message because the whole world, literally every album that came out, had a song concerning Mandela. Therefore, I thought, looking back, that music made their stance very powerful in that case.

For interest's sake, when Tracy Chapman's *Crossroads* album was released, we banned two or three cuts on it at the time. The chairman of the record company wanted us to re-submit it. The answer from the chairman of the SABC Committee was as follows:

*The two songs in question, 'Freedom Now' and 'Material World', were found to be undesirable because the committee was concerned that the songs would, for different reasons, offend certain sections of the community. You must realize that the SABC's various media provides programme material for the full spectrum of ... SA's extremely diverse community... Because of the nature of this diversity, the SABC in general and this committee in particular has to be sensitive .... Like you, we work towards new initiatives for freedom of expression and the creation of a just SA. In order to achieve this, we still have to consider the sensitivities of a large section of ..... SABC's total audience. If we don't, we may negate the very goal which we are trying to achieve.*

I told Ole Reitov — in a discussion we had — that I don't think the committee sat there and was evil per definition within themselves, they saw it as a role, which they were playing, and a job they were doing. Most of the people around the table actually believed in what they were doing and thought it was the right thing to do, so you can't shy away from that. But it was within the realms of SA that they did their job.

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, you wanted to say something?

**Ray Phiri:** What I don't also understand

is why did we have to submit lyrics with request to stage concerts. How do you determine how the performance is going to come out by simply writing the whole script of your show, how each song is going to be presented? Was their a censorship board also in the security police, whereby they would decide that this song is undesirable? Or whom did they consult with? Because we were playing for a community...Hence the situation in 1984 when Johnny Clegg and myself ended up having to negotiate with the police when they came and disrupted a concert.

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, we actually have a tape with Johnny Clegg telling about that incident. Johnny is touring in France right now, so he couldn't be here. (Johnny Clegg tape played to the conference audience):

*We were at Orlando Stadium playing with Stimela and a bunch of other black bands. We were raising money for 500 kids under the age of 17 and as young as 13, who were in indefinite political detention. Raising money for them for cloths for Christmas. We had a "Free the Children" sticker that was banned by the government. The show was banned, Bishop Tutu was going to speak and there were 12,000 people at the stadium. The place was completely surrounded by army military jeeps and soldiers and the security police. So I was chosen with Ray Phiri and Morgan from the security guards for the show to go and negotiate.*

**Ole Reitov:** Ray, how did you do that?

**Ray Phiri:** Things were turning out a little bit ugly because, by then, the people knew that the concert was in aid of kids who were detained. And they came in to support this good cause. But before we could perform, the police just moved in and tear-gassed everybody. They said that it was an illegal gathering and if we didn't disperse in 5 minutes they would start shooting. Thus, when we realized that the people's lives were in danger, we had to go and negotiate with them. That was when one of the top security guys said: "As long as you're not going to play that 'Pindamsala.'"

He did not know that the title of the song was "Don't Whisper in the Deep." It was more like a national anthem, we were trying to bring awareness to people that they must stand up and speak their mind, stand up not be afraid,

and wake up. At the time, it was the height of the struggle and most of us were ready to call a spade a spade. We were doing a lot of protest songs because we believed in them and then they closed us in with Johnny Clegg and we started negotiating. We said that if you stop the show now there is going to be chaos and riots.

Can you please let each band perform for at least 10 minutes each? They agreed, as long as we didn't sing that "Pindamsala." When I started singing the song I sang "Don't Whisper in the Deep" which was the same song. And I didn't use this "Pindamsala" — the audience did, so I thought if they sing then they have to arrest everyone. And that was the end of the show. Everybody sang along and that was the end of the show. They started shooting tear gas and stuff like that. We asked the people not to panic, not to throw any stones or that kind.

The power of the music prevailed because they listened to those people who were begging them not to retaliate. They all walked out of the stadium and the police got mad because the people didn't retaliate. The police started shooting at innocent people with tear gas to provoke them. But eventually on that day, music won.

**Ole Reitov:** We have a video with Johnny Clegg, so let's see it—the song is 'Asimbonanga'.

(The video is played to the conference audience).

**Ole Reitov:** Cecile, I remember you told me that when you heard Johnny singing this song in The Market Theatre in Johannesburg, which was the centre of many political opponents especially in the theatre world, you had a particular reflection on your work after this song.

**Cecile Pracher:** The song itself is an extremely moving song. At the time when it was released, I think in 1987, I was part of the (censor) committee. The political atmosphere had changed drastically in those days. To me it was almost like a cry from the heart from Johnny's side, it could not be right in any circumstances to kill people just because they don't believe the same that you do. And it could not be right to have such a censorship where this message could not be given to the people. It's like blacking it out and I think that happened in SA on almost all grounds. There was no free flow of information. There was a very, very selected flow

of what information people were allowed to hear, read and see. I think the music has changed a lot in the sense that Johnny Clegg could not be silenced. He was a very strong voice and he used it, as did others that were brave enough at the time. I think the value of the music didn't depend on whether it was censored or not, it still got to the people. People still heard it and the voice of the people, as you know, became stronger and stronger and could not be put down by anybody. Hence Mandela was released in 1991; hence we don't do cen-

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sorship anymore at the SABC and haven't done so for quite a number of years. No form of censor, as far as music or lyrics, is allowed at the SABC.

**Ole Reitov:** Was that a point where you started doubting what you were doing, or the motives behind it, on a personal level?

**Cecile Pracher:** Yes, it was not one particular song. It was a time when people started thinking differently. I don't think the state machine worked that efficiently anymore. There were voices from within the community that they couldn't put down effectively anymore because they became so loud and there were so many of them and so urgent. I don't think the message could be suppressed like it was in the earlier days anymore. The Afrikaaner and myself, we started looking for other possibilities of handling the situation—not being prescribed by or dictated to by people who think for you. Our frame of mind as Afrikaaners were very much that it was a paternal society where freedom of thought was not a norm and I think that has changed a lot since the late 1980s.

**Siphon Mabuse:** I think while our discussion here has centered mostly around the role of the SABC and the security police, it is

important for us to reflect and get an insight on what the role of the recording industry itself was in the process of censorship. Because I do not believe that the whole industry can be absolved of the responsibility of censorship. While, of course, the SABC was a catalyst, the main culprit, to what extent did the recording industry allow us, the creative people, to express ourselves freely. So that whatever expressions were going to affect the coffers. Now, did the censorship go as far as the SABC—were the record companies party to this?

I think we need to reflect on this because we also had problems with the record companies. Fortunately for us we seem to be influential and were able to record whatever we wanted to, but there were other musicians who were not as influential. They could not go in there and record their music because it would be seen as subversive. That also affected creativity as far as those musicians were concerned. I would like us to bring insight into those kinds of experiences.

Maybe Ray could help us? Maybe you too Cecile could give an input because maybe in your interaction with the record companies you knew exactly which companies would assume that certain music were not right for us to record. And you duly performed your duties as the censor because censorship in SA was not only between the creative people, the musicians and the SABC. It went as far as the government and business, which is important because if we don't address that part we could still end up with the same problem. The government may have gotten rid of censorship but what about business? What about the record companies? Are they going to say: "Well, we were not part of it. We don't censor."

**Ray Phiri:** That's true; they played a role in being allies with the state broadcast system. If, if I am not mistaken, in 1972 I was five years into my recording career and a song called 'Highland Drifter' was banned, and then the record company said: "We told you to stop writing in English. You've got to do more Zulu or Zulu languages."

So they were censoring me not to write in a much larger medium whereby I would be able to reach the four communities — because if you grew up in SA around this period, you would understand that there were four com-

munities: Indian, coloured, black and white. The 'Highland Drifter' single was banned in 1972 only to find that in neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe, at that time called Rhodesia, it was on their Radio 1 chart and it stayed there for 18 weeks at the no. 1 spot, which was undesirable in SA. They couldn't understand this. We toured Zimbabwe with 'The Beaters' before they became 'Harare'. Most of their music was done as The Beaters. They were the first group influencing SA artists to start writing in English.

**Siphon Mabuse** (interrupts): Before you speak about the pieces maybe you need to explain who the Beaters were. He is actually about me...

**Ray Phiri:** The Beaters were the first original band that 'Hotstix' Siphon Mabuse was leading. He co-founded that. So they had to change their name from 'The Beaters' because were banned from the airwaves. They changed their name to "Harare."

**Siphon Mabuse:** They thought we were the Beatles...

**Ray Phiri:** The record industry promoted that. Again in the 1980s, they did the same thing when I was called aside. I was signed with one record company for 25 years, and don't look at me with amazement—I am an old man trapped in a young man's body. Maybe some day I will grow... And so again I was called into a meeting and cautioned not to write political songs. But I said: "Who gave you the right to tell me what to and not to write?" From 1978 until 1982 we were frozen, had no contract or nothing. So I started writing under different names: Ray Zulu, Fana Firi—I had a lot of different names around and most of those records became popular until I was found out. But I told them: "You don't know what you have. If you knew what you had you would let me do what I do best." Then I was banned from recording for other the companies by my record company. So I was forced to produce only for one company. They were allowing me to do those songs because they were making money. Censorship plays a very important role in the music industry even up to date. Most musicians who are writing original material are being told that "this doesn't sell", so the music industry is contributing a great deal to censoring and stifling creativity.



**Ole Reitov:** There was a question to you Cecile, about the relations between SABC and the record industry. Could you tell about that?

**Cecile Pracher:** The effect of SABC's clamped down on information was directly resulting in the record companies, taking of a particular stance. They were in it for business — that's very clear — and they were protecting their rights. They knew that most often if a song is not given air time it doesn't have the same chance of being popular as the next one. So they forced a kind of censorship on their artists. I think what happened then was that the artists had their own censorship forced on themselves for bread and butter. If you rely on your income then you very often take the easier road. That had a major effect on SA's music in the 1980s and the 1970s. If censorship wasn't so completely successful, there would sooner have been a reaction from the people. That goes for music, but also much wider.

**Sipho Mabuse:** I think there's one other issue that we, perhaps need to clarify as far as censorship in SA is concerned. I think it should be clear that it was not really a question of black and white; It was a system which was fearful, which was scared; that would censor everything that sings to oppose its legitimacy. So I think when you see us here — Cecile, Ray and us; the two blacks and the one white woman — it is not really a true reflection of how censorship operated in SA. Of course, the whites were in power but there were also white musicians who were affected by the censorship in SA. So, I just wanted to say that it was never really a case of whites censoring black musicians.

**Ole Reitov:** There were also black censors at the SABC who were censoring black music. There is another thing I think we should talk about because we are talking about how the industry dealt with it and obviously SA musicians suffered from the fact that they were also not tuned into the world. I think that it was quite obvious to all of us when Paul Simon made *Graceland*. Let's all have a look at that. (Video of Paul Simon with Ray Phiri playing in Harare shown to the conference audience).

**Ole Reitov:** Before I leave the floor open for questions to the panel, could all three of you say something about how you look at the boycott today.

**Ray Phiri:** Looking back, you can say

that the cultural boycott helped to expose the evils of apartheid to the international community. It also helped us to hone our creativity and we are good at what we are doing. In a way it helped us focus more on the local content.

**Sipho Mabuse:** I think the cultural boycott did focus a lot on the political interest in our country. It allowed musicians at home to be more creative and to be more appreciated. But at the time it made it difficult for our music to be heard. One could say it was necessary because with the cultural boycott the chain was somewhat broken down. We needed the cultural boycott so that it became part of the on going struggle.

**Cecile Pracher:** The cultural boycott was obviously very successful: it was part of the other boycotts against South Africans and the ruling government. Be it not for the outcry worldwide — and part of that being the cultural boycott — it might have taken longer to free Mandela and for him to become the president of our wonderful country. Cultural boycott obviously was successful, but I am sorry though for all the artists within SA who because of that could not fulfil what they wanted to do in the world out there. Because it went both ways, it was not only going into SA, but the SA artists didn't have the same opportunities outside internationally. For that I am sorry, but it did have a wonderful influence on whole struggle for freedom. GR

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## Notes

1. In January 1995, Barbara Masekela was appointed South African Ambassador to France. Previously, she has served as Secretary for the Department of Arts and Culture, Director in the Office of the President of the African National Congress, and was a Member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC. In 1961, she joined the ANC, for which she served as chairperson of the U.S. branch. She spent 27 years in exile in Ghana, the United States, and in Zambia. In the United States, she was Assistant Professor at Livingstone College of Rutgers University from 1972 to 1982, where she taught English and Women's and African Literature.