



Handout 3 - Songs Against Apartheid

Gil Scott-Heron, "Johannesburg," 1976

Well before the release of the song "Johannesburg," poet and singer Gil Scott-Heron had established himself as a political voice in the United States. He first entered into mainstream American consciousness with "The Revolution Will Not be Televised," a spoken word piece that criticized American citizen's complacency and obsession with mass media. Scott-Heron's following work has regularly tackled issues related to black consciousness, police brutality, and drug abuse.



With "Johannesburg" Scott-Heron's political music shifted an international focus. The upbeat, funky song begins with Scott-Heron asking, "what's the word? Have you heard from Johannesburg?" Scott-Heron then answers his own question by discussing events occurring in the South African city, choosing not to focus on the injustices black people there were experiencing, but the ways they were fighting back. "They tell me that our brothers over there are defyn' the man," he sings, while later admitting to the listener, "I hate it when the blood starts flowin', but I'm glad to see resistance growin'." The song ends in a call and response section with Scott-Heron asking "What's the word?," and a chorus of singers emphatically replying "Johannesburg!" During live performances of the song, he would often request the audience themselves provide the response "Johannesburg!" almost as if to ensure the audience would remember the name of the place after the song.

In discussing the motivations behind the song, Scott-Heron said "I like to write songs about issues not because they became headlines but because they could become headlines. I don't write them after a crises and say, 'wasn't that something about South Africa.' The idea's not that everyone who heard my song would decide the way that I have but that, at least, they've got another way of looking at the problem."

"Johannesburg" was one of the earliest songs by an American musician that confronted the issue of apartheid, and it solidified Scott-Heron's anti-apartheid position. In the 1980s, he became one of the most ardent supporters of the Artists United Against Apartheid movement, providing commentary on the song "Let Me See Your ID," on the Sun City album. He also often appeared publicly with Steven Van Zandt in support of the cultural boycott against South Africa. By continuing to use his public position to address apartheid, Scott-Heron hoped to inspire a public outcry that would lead to more governmental action against apartheid in the United States. "It often takes as long to get straight as it did to get crooked," he says of apartheid, "now it's our responsibility to keep the pressure on."



Peter Gabriel, "Biko," 1980

On September 12, 1977, news spread around the world that prominent anti-apartheid leader Steven Biko had died, beaten to death by security officers.

Hearing the news, English musician Peter Gabriel became interested in Steven Biko's life and work, and read three biographies and as many of Biko's writings he could find. He then wrote one of the songs that has defined his career: the simply titled "Biko."



Having done thorough research, Gabriel could have easily made "Biko" a song about the leader's life and accomplishments. But he chose rather to write lyrics expressing his own reaction to Biko's death. "As a white, middle-class, ex-public schoolboy, domesticated, English person observing his own reactions from afar," Gabriel said in an interview, "it seemed impossible to me that the South Africans had let him be killed." Lyrically, the song begins by asserting the time and location Biko's death ("*September '77/Port Elizabeth weather fine/It was business as usual/In police room 619*") followed by an admission of disbelief over the injustices of apartheid ("*When I try to sleep at night/I can only dream in red/The outside world is black and white/With only one colour dead*"). By the last stanza, Gabriel looks to the future, and an end to apartheid, thanks to Biko's influence: "*You can blow out a candle/But you can't blow out a fire/Once the flames begin to catch/The wind will blow it higher.*"

Gabriel's lyrics are made all the more powerful by the sparse instrumentals of the song. A slow, minimal drumbeat accompanied by long, distorted guitar chords and bagpipe drones give the song a mournful quality. "Biko" takes a funeral-like character in the chorus, when Gabriel laments, "*Yihla Moja, The Man is Dead*"-- "*Yihla Moja*" being a Xhosa phrase meaning, "come spirit." The song ends with a recording of a traditional South African funeral song.

"Biko" was an entry point into Gabriel's lifelong commitment to human rights. He refers to the song as "a calling card announcing I was interested and prepared to get involved." While it did not top any charts, "Biko" had enormous impact, awakening many to the injustices of apartheid. The song inspired Steven Van Zandt to create the Artists United Against Apartheid, and Gabriel became a featured musician on the album. The song was also regularly featured in various concerts in support of South African Awareness and human rights, from Amnesty International's "A Conspiracy of Hope" campaign to Nelson Mandela's 70th Birthday Celebration.



The Specials A.K.A, “Free Nelson Mandela,” 1984

While he was involved in the anti-apartheid movement in England since the age of 14, musician Jerry Dammers only learned about anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela after attending a 1983 benefit concert in London for the imprisoned leader. “I picked up lots of leaflets at the concert and started learning about Mandela,” Dammers recalls, “at that point, he’d been imprisoned for 21 years.” Inspired to write a song in dedication to Nelson Mandela and “what he stood for,” Dammers worked with musician Elvis Costello to produce “Free Nelson Mandela.”



The song begins with a clear assertion, sung a capella: “Free Nelson Mandela!” Following this, the song informs the listener about Nelson Mandela, with the first verse describes Mandela’s unjust imprisonment (“*Twenty-one years in captivity/shoes too small to fit his feet/his body abused but his mind is still free*”), and the second introducing Mandela’s important role in the African National Congress, the anti-apartheid political party in South Africa, (“*Pleaded the causes at the ANC/Only one there in a large army*”). Dammers wrote that “the song said what I wanted it to say very clearly. At the time, there was a huge amount of opposition and propaganda directed against Mandela. [British Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher had described his party, the African National Congress, as a ‘terrorist organization.’” Seeing the song therefore as a way to rehabilitate the image of Nelson Mandela and garner further interest in the anti-apartheid, Dammers also included information about the Anti-Apartheid Movement on the record sleeve for those who wished to help the imprisoned leader.

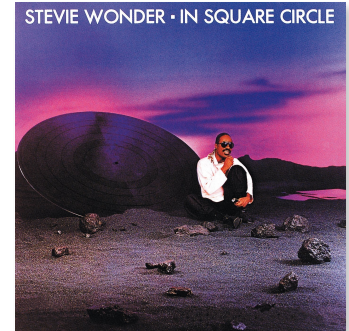
Thanks to the uplifting, danceable feeling of the song, “Free Nelson Mandela” became a huge hit, reaching No. 6 in the U.K. charts. While banned in South Africa, Mandela’s party, the African National Congress, embraced the song as their anthem. College students played it continually at events and dances, and it was played by DJs throughout the world. The popularity of the song helped Dammers facilitate further action against apartheid: in 1988, he helped organize the Nelson Mandela’s 70th Birthday Concert at London’s Wembley Stadium, an internationally televised event that was watched by 600 million people.

Like “Sun City,” Dammers’ “Free Nelson Mandela” continues to serve as an example of an artistic work that led to positive cultural change.



Stevie Wonder, “It’s Wrong (Apartheid),” 1985

Since the beginning of his career, Stevie Wonder has addressed political issues and causes through his music. In the songs “Big Brother” and “Living in the City,” Wonder remarks on institutional neglect of poor communities; in “Misrepresented People” he recalls the history of slavery; and in “Village Ghetto Land,” poverty across the globe. Perhaps most significantly, Wonder’s song “Happy Birthday,” served a key role in advocating a national holiday for Luther King Jr.’s birthday.



In 1985, Wonder became publicly involved in the anti-apartheid movement. In February of that year, he was arrested at anti-apartheid protest in Washington DC. Days later, he dedicated the Grammy Award he had won for the song “I Just Called to Say I Love You,” to Nelson Mandela. By September he released the song “It’s Wrong (Apartheid)” on the double-platinum album *In Square Circle*.

As he does in many songs, Wonder takes a religious approach in “It’s Wrong,” beginning with a biblical scolding: *“The wretchedness of Satan’s wrath/Will come to seize you at last/’cause even he frowns upon the deeds you are doing/And you know deep in your heart/You’ve no covenant with God/’cause he would never countenance people abusing.”* In the chorus, powerful in its simplicity, Wonder compares apartheid to some of the most abhorrent forms of injustice: *“You know apartheid’s wrong/Like slavery is wrong/like the holocaust was wrong/apartheid is wrong.”* Showing solidarity with the struggles of black South Africans, Wonder ends the song with lyrics similar in message in the Zulu language, while repeating the hopeful phrase *“Inkululeko lyeza”*--“Freedom is coming.”

Wonder draws heavily upon African music in “It’s Wrong.” The rhythmic foundation of the song, made up of digital and acoustic percussion, recalls the complex polyrhythms found in musical traditions throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Wonder also plays the kora, a West African stringed instrument, on the recording. Perhaps most notably, Wonder is accompanied by a chorus of exiled South African musicians he hired to perform.

Because of the direct indictment of apartheid displayed in “It’s Wrong,” coupled by Wonder’s various anti-apartheid actions, the South African government banned all of Stevie Wonder’s music. But the popularity and impact of the song only increased awareness of the injustices of apartheid--and just a few years later, Wonder would be singing to a freed Nelson Mandela during a birthday celebration.