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The Use of Protest Song

Throughout the world, music has played an integral role in how people express themselves. Whether the times are good or bad, people have turned to music as a way to display their emotions so that others easily understand them. During Apartheid in South Africa, many members of the black community used music as a way of expression and also to unite people with similar motives. When studying this time period and the role that music played in it, many people argue whether the movement was made possible by the musical culture or if the music in the film simply came as a result of the movement. Some of the people featured in Amandla! argue whether struggle or song came first, but the topic of discussion here is whether the movement created the music or the musical culture helped create the movement. Many protest songs are featured in the film and are representative of the bold emotion surrounding the times of Apartheid in South Africa. Although many of these songs were created during Apartheid, the entire resistance movement would not have happened if music had not played such a large role in the Black South African society, giving people a lively way to express their emotions resulting from their struggles.

Apartheid was the main system used to govern South Africa from 1948-1994 and was enforced by the National Party government in which the white minority, called Afrikaners, ruled over the black majority. The system was introduced when the National Party came into power in 1948. Apartheid lasted for almost fifty years until President F.W. de Klerk, with the help of
Nelson Mandela, began to repeal many of the discriminatory laws in 1991. Mandela was the successor of President de Klerk and was the first black President of South Africa. The two of them would later be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their tremendous accomplishments. The original goal of Apartheid was to separate the people of South Africa into different nations, keeping the blacks and whites separate. The whites would get a much larger portion of the land and have control of lucrative resources like mines near Johannesburg, but the blacks would be forced to work in them for very little money. Segregation was a major part of this system. Blacks were forced to leave their homes, removed from political office, and were put into different schools than the whites. Although they played an integral role in the booming South African economy, the blacks never saw the benefits of the virtual slave labor that they were forced to provide. The Apartheid system was similar to early twentieth century segregation in the United States of America, but much more dramatic. Apartheid showed some similarities to the Holocaust as well due to the way in which blacks were relocated from their homes and forced to work labor-intensive jobs. All of these terrible circumstances led to the continued use and creation of many songs and hymns just like Black South Africans had done for centuries, which were then used to unite people towards a common goal that led to revolution.

Music was used in many different ways during Apartheid in South Africa. The most common use of song during these times was to create a common form of expression amongst the oppressed people. Sibongile Khumalo, one of the musicians and cultural activists featured in Amandla!, talks about how there were some songs that virtually every Black South African knew and they would sing them together mostly in public. The film shows black workers singing together as they ride the loaded trains to their mining jobs where they would receive very little pay. By singing these songs, the blacks were able to create a sense of community and support for
each other. Although some of the songs that were sung were well-known hymns, others featured lyrics that were explicitly about the struggles that the Black South Africans faced. An example of this is the following set of lyrics: “What have we done? Our only sin is being black.” While very simple, this song embodies the motivation for the movement in just a few words, which gave it great usefulness as an easy way to unite the Black South Africans. Even though the blacks were forced into some of the worst living conditions possible, the use of song helped boost morale, which showed the ruling Afrikaners that the blacks were not broken by the circumstances and remained a strong community. Also, the blacks were able to integrate public announcements into the music through avenues like Radio Freedom, which featured messages and music that informed and encouraged the members of their oppressed community. Although some aspects of the protest music, such as the lyrics, were unique to South African Apartheid, many features resonate well with Sub-Saharan music in general.

In general, Sub-Saharan African music tends to have three major characteristics: it is communally transmitted, involves some type of audience participation through dance or singing, and usually serves a spiritual or religious purpose. The use of music during the South African Apartheid shows all three of these characteristics rather clearly. Most of the music was never written down, but rather passed on from person to person orally. People learned the songs by hearing them sung by family members, coworkers, and friends. The call-and-response nature of some of the songs helped people sing along to a song that they were not familiar with since they simply repeated what the “caller” was singing. This format further strengthens the unifying function of music during the times of Apartheid. Although much of the songs and hymns that were used during Apartheid period did not have actual dances that went along with them, footage of Black South Africans singing these songs shows people freely dancing, clapping, and tapping
along with the music. Just like traditional Sub-Saharan African music, communal participation and improvisation, especially dancing and clapping, was greatly encouraged and expected when these Apartheid songs were sung. From a spiritual standpoint, the use of song helped the South Africans, especially the Freedom Fighters, stay positive even after facing terrible situations such as losing loved ones. Instead of mourning and crying when burying people, the Freedom Fighters would sing. These songs were often spiritual so they allowed for religion to still be a part of the burial process while also adding uplifting feeling to the ceremonies. A similar ritual is seen in the Agbekor ceremonies performed by the Ewe people. Despite being very similar to many other Sub-Saharan African music types, music during the Apartheid also shares characteristics to the music used in other protests throughout the world.

From slavery to the War on Terror, there have been countless songs that were written and sung to express the feelings of people against an issue. During the times of slavery in the United States, slave workers would sing songs together in attempt to mend their pain by simply expressing pent-up emotions. The joining together of slaves through music strengthened the sense of community as they worked in the fields and reassured each other that there was hope amidst the struggle. In more contemporary American history, famous artists have produced songs and sometimes even entire albums that sound off against world events. In the past century, a very popular topic of protest music has been anti-war sentiment. An example of this is the work done by Bruce Springsteen including “Born in the U.S.A.” which describes the life of a man who fights in the Vietnam War and the struggles he faces after he returns home. In the past decade, there have been songs protesting both political and racial issues such as Young Jeezy’s “My President” in which he addresses his frustrations surrounding the underrepresentation of blacks in political office and how they have been soothed by the election of President Barack Obama.
Both slave songs and modern pop music with political messages have the goal of providing a message to constituents of the protest and unify them, which is similar to the purpose of protest songs sang by the Black South Africans. The closest comparison to Sub-Saharan protest song is the music sung by slaves as both are rather religious, are learned orally, and allow for community participation. Also, many of the slaves stemmed from African cultures that were similar to the Black South Africans. More modern examples of protest song, like the examples from Bruce Springsteen and Young Jeezy, although seemingly abstract, still aim to unite a community around a revolutionary vision, but they are produced commercially and are intended to be a message to the general public and are not often sung collectively by followers in the way that Apartheid songs were. It is still impressive however, that a rock artist from the 1980s and a rap artist from the 2000s both show similarities to songs sung by Black South Africans during Apartheid. In all of these cases, a musical culture allowed all of these types of protest songs to be successful motivators for change.

Thanks to a highly musical culture in South Africa, the use of song as a form of protest during the times of Apartheid was actually an effective way of uniting the Black South Africans together in order to spark a resistance movement. The work of incredible people like Nelson Mandela would not have been possible if not supported by a very unified community. The strength of the community can be attributed to the importance of music and the high-level of participation in musical acts. Even though many people today think of musical expression as being a feeling of freedom when blasting pop music on the radio, many people throughout the world have used this same device and similar feeling of nostalgia to inspire people to achieve something much more dramatic.