An insider perspective of South African jazz

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The South African pianist Nduduzo Makhathini (b. 1982) has presented his spirituality-infused conception of jazz music on eleven albums under his own name, on several more as a sideman, and during numerous international concert tours. His dissertation contributes an uncommon emphasis on perspectives that are unfamiliar to jazz studies. It is an attempt to contextualize not only his own music but, importantly, (South) African musical improvisation in general through the relationships between musicianship and spirituality, between playing/writing and ritual, based in traditional African cosmology.

Needless to say, issues of colonialism, oppression and apartheid sadly play a crucial role in such undertakings. In Makhathini's words, 'the epistemologies, cosmologies and ontologies of people in former colonial zones have been hijacked and distorted by those of the West' (p. 27). He considers conventional Western musical terminology inadequate to express the sound/music contexts he intends to discuss. His work hence aims to 'transcend the marginalization of African knowledge systems by modernity' and 'break away from Western epistemic regimes by inserting knowledges transmitted orally and aurally' (p. 29) in order to attain an 'African cosmologically-based mode for playing-thinking-writing about sound (and by extension music)' (p. 66). He describes his study as 'experiential, reflective, suggestive and performative, rather than empirical and authoritative' (p. 17); for instance, in the 'sonic ritual meditations' included in his dissertation Makhathini sets out to explore 'manifestations of *ntu* on the bandstand via a way of relating to others, environment, space, time, form and the spirit worlds' (p. 34).

As an academic project, Makhathini's study seemingly has met with some opposition; it presents and advocates ways and dimensions of knowing that are alien to most, if not all, Western humanities and arts discourses. In Makhathini's view of South African jazz, improvisation depends on divination, on powerful ancestral spirits speaking through dreams, through meditation, and through the music. Consequently, it depends on improvisers' 'cosmological situatedness' (p. 108) and their ritual strategies to connect with 'elsewhere': 'to improvise, one must be in touch with a spirit world and have the willingness to surrender to its guidance' (p. 103). A particularly colourful example of the resistance Makhathini's project has encountered within academia is his university's research ethics board's denial to permit ritual animal slaughter as part of one of the dissertation's integrated sonic meditations in concert; according to the author, the slaughter would have symbolized gratitude to ancestors who guided him through the work. Regardless of whether readers find such perspectives provocative or not, Makhathini's well-thought-out and well-wrought account for an understanding of African

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music against a backdrop of traditional *ntu* cosmology must be considered a highly interesting and genuinely unique contribution to jazz studies and to general musicology.

Makhathini argues from a musical and artistic standpoint as well as a theoretical one; he positions his study as an artistic-led inquiry. In-between its chapters the dissertation includes five sonic meditations that are intended to function as meaning-making components in an intertextual relationship with his writing, 'invoking the spirits' of his musical predecessors (p. 16). Makhathini finds that these pieces are 'best approached as rituals, i.e., ways of making sense of being, the spirit worlds and surrounding environments' (p. 76), and he argues that 'listening to these sounds is as important as reading their accompanying texts. It is another mode of sense-making; the sounds enunciate where written texts do not reach' (p. 79).

Chapter 1 introduces the study. As a result of personal dream experiences in combination with his cultural heritage, Makhathini, at an early age, became a healer in the Zulu tradition, steeped in Nguni cultural practices. It is obvious throughout his dissertation that no other singular experience than that of being a healer has had a larger influence on his work as a musician, composer and improviser: 'over many years I have been transposing [...] traditional *sangoma* practices in Nguni healing systems to my practice as an improviser situated in South African jazz practices [...;] I argue that my improvisation is guided by the ancestors and could be understood as messages and texts to both myself and the audiences' (pp. 14–15). Makhathini understands improvisation as a three-stage process: from the known to the unknown towards a new knowing, where the stages are associated with rites of passage.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Outlining *ntu* cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies: towards a sound-world'. Cosmology in Makhathini's understanding is a worldview: how people understand their being in the world over time. In African metaphysics, the individual is ontologically part of the community, and the community is ontologically prior to the individual. The philosophy of *ntu* as a 'life force' or creative force, viewing all creation as a manifestation of *ntu*, is common for all Bantu-speaking cultures, i.e., a majority of sub-Saharan African peoples. Makhathini speaks of an 'onto-triadic' structure of being, encompassing the living (humans), 'the living dead' (ancestors) and the 'yet-to-be-born'. The living dead continue to live in the ancestral realm, and the living rely on their intervention for protection.

The principle of *ubu-ntu* (roughly translatable as 'being as wholeness') encompasses notions of wholeness and continuity. Music, singing, drumming and dancing (*ngoma*, *malombo*) in Nguni and Venda/Pedi cosmologies, respectively, cannot be viewed apart from their performative meanings as healing practices and ritual processes that move from one paradigm of knowing to another, thereby offering a passageway for a continuous relationship with the whole.

In Chapter 3, 'Proposing new perspectives and vocabularies in improvised musics', Makhathini proposes the employment of *ntu* cosmology, with its major principles wholeness and continuity, as a conceptual point of departure for understanding (South) African musical improvisation practices. He introduces the term 'breaking into sound' for the 'collapse of the borders between the physical and spiritual' (p. 67), based in part

on a variety of Zulu sayings – such as, e.g., *ufikelwe ingoma* (song visited him/her) – that refer to song arising or visiting *from elsewhere*; 'song (similar to being) has a pre-existence and the breaking into sound is the moment of song emerging into audibility'; 'song/music is part of a metaphysical reality that is constantly alive, an ancestral paradigm' (p. 68). Breaking into song, then, can be seen as a process of being guided from the known into the unknown, a liminal phase where the voice of the ancestor vocalizes. In this context, *surrender* emerges as a posture of readiness to receive a particular message through song. In Makhathini's view, 'improvisation in jazz could be thought of as the harmonisation of the physical and spiritual paradigms'; 'the invocation of existing music during ritualized improvised performance constitutes a form of citation of sounds and texts from spirit dimensions' (pp. 73–74). Given the view on performance as ritual, Makhathini suggests that the bandstand may be seen as a sacred altar (*umsamu*), a space that requires ritualization.

From the perspective of research in music education narratives, I find one of Makhathini's many anecdotes particularly enchanting as well as reflective of the *ntu* cosmology's influence on African views on how musical proficiency is seen as inheritance from ancestors: 'In the Eastern Cape I once met an elderly man who claimed to have been guided to spend three nights at the cemeteries, after which he woke up knowing how to play the guitar. He continued to tell me that the ancestors broke the sixth string and to this day he only plays the five strings that were left' (p. 72).

To my mind, Makhathini summarizes in this paragraph some essential features of his entire study:

> Improvised music, ritualized, happens 'elsewhere' in a state of liminality conducive to breaking into sound. In this way, music performance, as it relates to trance, meditation and spirit possession widens how one understands experience in a way that transcends physical surroundings, but also involves spirit presence. Music in this context is not the end in itself but the beginning of a journey. That is to say, sound breaks into a multiplicity of being in the world. Wholeness, as multiplicity ritualized, becomes a central indicator for sound production in ritual contexts. In other words, sound breaks into a state of multiplicity, here and elsewhere, sounding being as simultaneous and plural. I argue that the invocation of existing music during ritualized improvised performance constitutes a form of citation of sounds and texts from spirit dimensions. (p. 74)

In Chapters 4–7, Makhathini engages with the lives and artistic practices of four of his South African musical predecessors who are said to relate in their music to *ntu* cosmology through ancestry, birth, socialization and initiation, and to exemplify connections between *ubuntu*, *ngoma* and *malombo*. He turns to these musical artists as interlocutors to construct a framework for engaging with spirituality in improvisation and jazz practices. A number of proverbs in Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Venda etc. emerge as important in this context; in particular, perhaps, the Zulu saying: *indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili* (the path can only be known by the ones that have walked before; thus, to know, one must consult the elders).

First, the career of guitarist Philip Tabane (1934–2018) was based on spontaneous creation (*mato*) anchored in healing practices through dialogue with *malombo* spirits. Second, singer/dancer Busi Mhlongo (1947–2010) viewed her performances as forms of

rituals linked to healing practices. Third, pianist/multi-instrumentalist Bheki Mseleku (1955–2008) referred to himself as a spirit medium and linked his composing to his ontological understanding of the world as based on wholeness and continuity. Here it becomes clear that the *ntu* cosmology need not be a closed worldview; rather, as in Mseleku's case, it can engage in conversations with, e.g., Eastern belief systems. According to Makhathini, Mseleku's music allowed room for spontaneous creation, which Makhathini attributes to 'spirit interventions that emerge out of the expanded forms of gatherings and rituals where ancestors commune with the living' (p. 151). Fourth and last, reed player Zim Ngqawana (1959–2011) similarly referred to improvisation as connecting with the unseen. He combined embracing Xhosa rites of passage with a universalist outlook drawing on Eastern spirituality, Islam and Sufism. Again, the bandstand as a sacred ritual place emerges as crucial. Makhathini mentions that he has witnessed all these four musicians 'burning various types of incense on the bandstand as a symbol of the purification of space, transforming the bandstand to a place of invitation that includes spirit worlds' (p. 193).

In the dissertation's concluding Chapter 8, 'Enunciating a new framework', Makhathini concludes that 'to improvise is not to compose melodies spontaneously (as most people think), but to "compose" our very being into a heightened state, returning to our pre-existent spirit essence' (p. 191).

In sum, Makhathini's perspectives on musical improvisation present a distinct alternative to prevailing views. In a sense, they could perhaps be seen as a consistent extension of Christopher Small's view on group musicking as a ritual where participants explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity. I do know from my own inquiries into Western jazz improvisers' views on their work that it is not uncommon for them to describe their experiences in terms of images of connecting to and being a channel for 'a higher power' in musical improvisation. However, it is beyond this reviewer's competence to evaluate details in Nduduzo Makhathini's account of traditional African cosmological and philosophical views or, for that matter, the sustainability of his perspectives on their indispensability to understanding (South) African jazz. Notwithstanding, his dissertation is the most thought-provoking jazz study I have read in a very long time; it is a remarkable and important contribution to the field of research in musical improvisation, one that will probably be read and cited widely in future studies inspired by it.

Sven Bjerstedt