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music

One of the main ways of judging the strength of an industry is to gauge how well its products are accepted in its home market, and to what extent that industry has reached out to markets in the rest of the world.

Applying this judgement to the case of South African music shows an industry that is alive and dancing its way into the hearts of millions of local and international music fans.

It took a long time for this to happen, but when it happened, it happened fast.

For decades, the best selling recorded music in this country has been the local *mbaqanga*. But its sales in the early days were low key because those who pulled the strings of mainstream society did not accept the fact that indigenous music had such popular appeal to the South African community at large.

Those who appreciated *mbaqanga* music were mostly *amagoduka* — the migrant labourers who flooded the major industrial centres from the rural areas. They appreciated Ladysmith Black Mambazo's *mbube* and gave the group the support it needed to make it so big today. Because of the pervasive influence of westernisation in cities like Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Pretoria, black people who lived there were conditioned into believing that The Beatles, Miles Jackson and Betty Wright were much better.

Their culture was taken away from them to such an extent that they looked down on the *amagoduka* who sang songs "bringing the cows home at dusk" instead of "love me, squeeze me, baby".

Even the record companies that recorded the *mbaqanga* those days were reluctant to welcome it and record

THEN THERE WAS GRACE

Just how well is South African music doing and what effect did the cultural boycott and Paul Simon have?

**MICHAEL
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some of the musicians and their albums in one-take sessions. No overdubbing, no second takes. Musicians were pressured to cut a 40-minute album in one hour. Despite the obviously inferior quality of these take-away quick LPs, they sold millions of copies.

Their sales formed the backbone of the South African music industry and gave record companies the capital to record other music styles acceptable to the western ear.

In those days there were basically two markets — the modern music market dominated by American artists, and the indigenous market dominated by Zakes Nkosi, Spokes Mashiane and later Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

In the late 1970s, young Black Consciousness activists embarked on the cultural isolation campaign to pressure the South African government. They also em-

phasised the fact that we should be proud of our culture and that singers like Mara Louw should not be support acts to foreign artists.

Foreign musicians were picketed, harassed and some of their shows were stopped. The O'Jays played at Orlando Stadium and were confronted at their Johannesburg hotel by angry activists for doing so. They cancelled the rest of their shows, went home and apologised publicly at the United Nations for breaking the cultural boycott.

Ray Charles, who was booked to play on October 19, was threatened with severe bodily harm if he went ahead with the show on a day of such importance to the struggle. He cancelled and went home.

In this atmosphere, attention turned to local artists and they began headlining in community halls. Their popularity grew and today open-air venues are sometimes too small to contain some of the crowds.

According to CCP Record Company's Peter Mbolekwa, the South African market is basically divided into the traditional *mbaqanga*, which still dominates the market as a whole, and the modern music category whose local artists' popularity has grown tremendously.

"The turnabout in the appreciation of what we call modern music came in 1983 when Brenda Fasié released her *Weekend Special* record and established herself as a singer with mass appeal. The record went on to sell 230,000 copies, which was a major achievement then and is still a milestone for such a small market.

"Before then, American musicians ruled the roost." Her records sold in neighbouring countries and attracted attention to other local musicians who began enjoying top billing in cities like Harare, G a b o r o n e ,

Mbabane and Maseru.

"Bubblegummers" jumped on the bandwagon and record companies, realising the enormous lucrative potential of this simple music, flooded record shops with the music of people like Dan Nkosi, Sox, Lazarus Kgagudi and Zizi Kongo.

Dan Nkosi said in a television interview that he plays "bubblegum" because the people want it. "If they didn't want it, we would play something else. We are giving them what they want."

Although *mbaqanga* music had enormous local appeal, it was not promoted to the extent that other countries took notice of it.

The turnabout for *mbaqanga* came in the unexpected form of a humble American pop singer called Paul Simon.

Simon heard a pirate tape of a collection of South African music and was enthralled by the arrangements.

He set up contacts and visited South Africa to hear the music first-hand. He recruited some musicians and sat with them for hours, days and months writing, arranging and recording the music abroad.

Simon had an enormous music reputation and when he presented Tau Ea Matsekha, Kolozi Lebona, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Ray Phiri, Isaac Mtshali and Bakithi Khumalo to the world, it took notice.

Once the world had taken notice, thousands of South Africans unplugged their culturally blocked ears to music that had been played for decades and was appreciated by millions of their fellow countrymen.

Record companies were probably embarrassed by the attention *mbaqanga* music was receiving and almost overnight the quality of the recordings improved.

Phuzushukela, who had a habit of visiting Johannesburg from KwaZulu for a day to record a whole LP, began to stay over and put together records that were technically good.

Mbaqanga recordings improved to such an extent that youngsters who previously were hooked on the Commodores, Maze and Dave Grusin, began buying records and tapes of Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens and, of course, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, particularly considering the fact that they won a Grammy Award in the traditional folk category for a compilation of their best songs titled *Shaka Zulu*.

People who were once proud of the fact that they played no South African music in their car stereo cassette players, today blast the sounds of Stimela and Sankomota for all the hear. So, South African music is alive and well, thanks to a merging of factors generated by the isolation campaign and the attention of the world Paul Simon was able to bring to indigenous South African music. □

LAND



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HITTING THE HIGH NOTES

South African music has come far over the last few years and finally seems to be striking the right chords.

JIMMY BEAUMONT speaks with the heads of major record companies and gives some broad perceptions of the industry

South Africa's music scene is as complicated as its politics. It is a world of contradictions stirred up by such phenomena as cultural boycotts and opposing allegiances, and by professional rivalry and jealousies on a Byzantine scale.

It is a multimillion-rand industry that is an easy target for brickbats and bouquets from all quarters; charges of monopoly, partisanship and vested interests being as common as praise for recent innovation and improved product quality.

South African music has, over the last couple of years, enjoyed an unprecedented popularity both inside and outside the country. This wave, spearheaded by mbaqanga, a uniquely local sound rooted in a base of rhythm-and-blues and soul, seems to have taken the industry by surprise. Is it being exploited properly? Opportunities have been thick on the ground for our musicians, but is it a lasting situation, and where is it going to? And does it have any real substance, because for every top-class band that has grabbed an opportunity there have been several mediocre ones seizing a share of the spoils: directly disproportionate to their talents.

Tribute spoke with some music industry people to get a picture of perceptions within the sector.

Fred Withers is MD of Gallo-GRC, a company that stables South African superstars such as Lucky Dube, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Stimela, Spho "Hotstix" Mabuse, Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens and mega-seller pop band Splash.

Another record company MD we spoke to was Benjy Mudie of Tusk Music, which

represents bright new acts such as Marc-Alex and Mango Groove as well as others like Lesley Rae Dowling and the Madlala Brothers.

What do they have to say about claims that poor acts are being marketed to the detriment of superior ones?

Basically, the answer from both was simple: The public wants it, so we give it to them.

"Financial as well as musical considerations decide what acts we are going to release," says Withers. "We must make sure records are going to sell. That's the nature of business. Then, if we have enough acts to ensure we can stay alive, we can promote other acts as well."

In a sense, then, top-selling but not necessarily good bands subsidise the cream.

"Bubblemusic," says Withers, emphasising that he does not like the term *bubblemusic* but that it is widely used by the media, "sells very well indeed".

As an illustration, one can look at just two sales figures: the dance/pop band Splash sells in the region of 100,000 copies a record, while the superb African Jazz Pioneers, who recently completed a tour of the Netherlands, can expect to notch up sales of only 10,000 on the home front. As Mudie says: "You can't argue with success."

So it would seem that gripes about the poor quality of many bands being promoted are all in the minds of the media. The buying public puts its money where its tastes are, and its tastes are not particularly refined.

One member of a record company's promotions staff who asked not to be named was blunt: "There is a lot of crap being produced, but that is what sells."

Withers places some of the blame at the doorsteps of radio stations.

"Our radio stations are too conservative," he says. "Their task should be to enlighten and educate people and show them what's happening."

Radio stations shape listening patterns, but their programme compilers stick to what is safe (very often "bubblemusic"), neglecting music that is good but different.

Withers would like to see more independent radio stations spring up. "Overseas you have rap stations, jazz stations, stations catering to all tastes," he says. "Here, rap music is not getting the airplay it deserves. Rap will only happen in about 10 years time. It is aggressive, different. That's what music should be about."

Koos Radebe, station manager of Radio Metro, which has an audience of about 800,000, gave his viewpoint: "How do you define good music or bubblemusic? Our task is to serve local artists. But we must give listeners what they want. We recently did a survey of listeners and their choices deviated very little from what we play. That survey was a confirmation that we are on target. We have done our research, and we must market our station."

It could be argued that the listener survey deviated little from what is played simply because listeners have developed an ear for what they have been consistently offered, but the whole issue is rather like the old question of what came first; the chicken or the egg?

Mudie is impressed with the radio stations, and says they have opened up and become more adventurous.

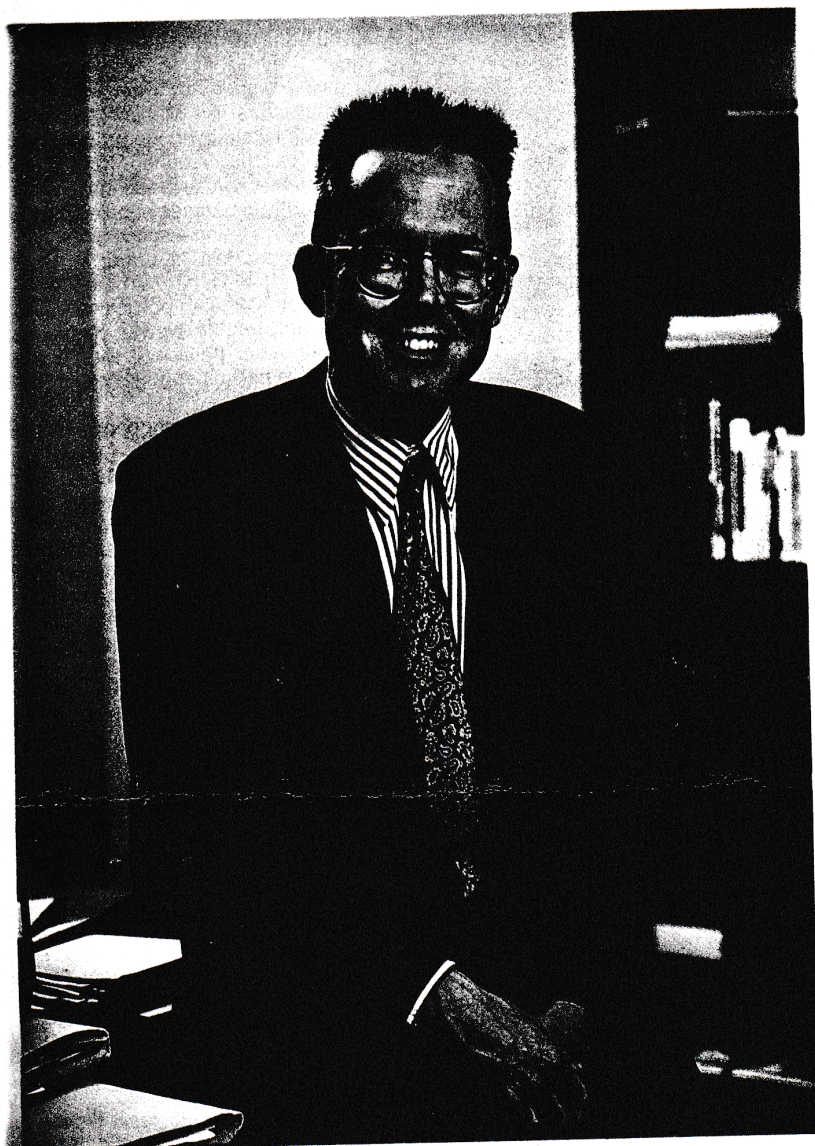
He mentions other considerations as well as the financial in music promotion: concepts such as the individual right of expression and the need to give everyone a chance.

Many of the bands perceived as being inferior are those adhering strictly to more traditional sounds, and, says Mudie, "traditional music must be preserved. If you lose it you lose sight of what you are trying to achieve. We try to be as diverse as we can."

"There is place in the music industry for everybody. They all have the right to express themselves."

Mudie says traditional music has always been a best-seller, and to prove his point he cites Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, saying they were doing well as far back as the '70s. The difference now is that Mahlathini has become more high-profile since exposure overseas, for instance at London's Mandela concert last year.

The veteran musician and his group recently collaborated with British band The Art of Noise in a recording venture which yielded "Yebo", a song that has



Withers: "There is room for everybody."

become a dance smash hit.

South African composer West Nkosi has writer interest in the song. Nkosi has been a one-man industry when it comes to local music. The CNA Gallo Group, in its 1989 annual report, paid high tribute to Nkosi, saying of him: "Millions of records by some of the best local musicians are the result of West Nkosi's pioneering spirit. His dedication to the black music industry has put Gallo GRC among the leaders in this field."

Small record companies, which have proliferated in recent years, play an important role when it comes to talent-scouting and promoting quality artists. They are more able to take chances, says Withers.

"The more record companies there are the better," he says. "There is a myth that

the industry is monopolised, but a lot of small companies specialise in black music. They can also provide new artists with a more personal touch. The more small record companies there are, the less likely it is that good acts will be overlooked. Times have been good lately, and there is room for everybody."

Mudie agrees, saying "small companies are absolutely necessary in the business. They can find talent that other people won't touch".

And yet they are obviously still missing some. Artists like singer Tsidii Leloka, languishing undiscovered in cabaret shows, spring to mind. Leloka has more talent in her small finger than many of the big sellers can gather in both hands, but she has still not been picked up.

Withers has an explanation: "She must find the right material," he says. "The problem is that her style could be too similar to

that of overseas stars like Aretha Franklin."

While the mainline music industry has tended to ignore most bands that are not commercially viable pop outfits, "alternative" firms have grown to fill the gap. The most recent has been the Sun Music Company, which, at only a few months old, has already completed a major product involving Afro-fusion band Sakhile. An album is due for release any time now under the African Echoes label. Sun Music is the offspring of Kippiess founding manager Eirfaan Gillan and Jazz musician Rashid Vally, who is also co-director of Roots Records.

But talent-scouting aside, the small record companies are doing well, with one possible exception being World of Music (WOM), which is in trouble not linked to the music industry.

WOM shares have been suspended on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) for some time now, and a JSE spokesman told *Tribute* the company was "in some financial difficulty". It would appear WOM over-extended itself with acquisitions in its infancy, committing itself to expenses exceeding its assets.

WOM handles, among other artists, Neil Solomon and the Passengers, and Wendy Oldfield.

Gallo-GRC, taking advantage of the upsurge in interest in South African sounds, has a company, Shisa International, which markets exclusively overseas. "Through our investment in Shisa, we continue to actively expand and develop this exciting new outlet for the creative talents of SA's own musical greats," Gallo says.

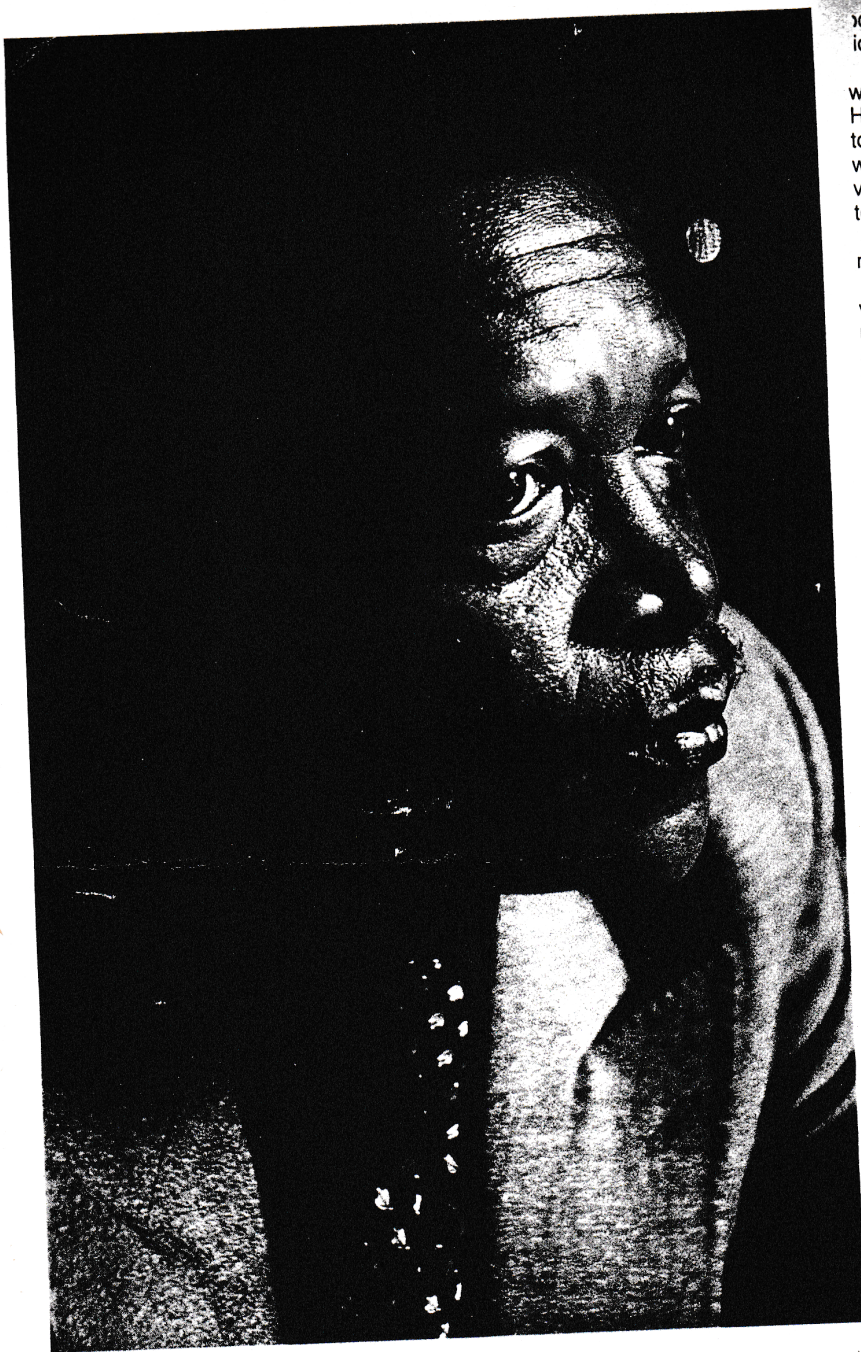
So all in all it has been a fruitful year, with new acts fielded, some overlooked, old ones entrenched and, at the time of going to press, stars like Lucky Dube reaching sales of 200,000 for his LP "Slave", a special achievement in South Africa.

It seems as if there is no stopping the bandwagon, but is local music ever going to make its much-hoped-for international breakthrough? Withers does not believe it will. Not soon, anyway, despite the recent successes.

"I don't think South African music is going to be the 'reggae' of the '80s and '90s," he says. "We have been more successful with collaborations. We are not going to crack our own world hits very easily. Graceland was a world hit, but it was a collaboration.

"You can't get groups to change their sound in order to find a formula for foreign success. You can't pressurise a group to change like that. Artists have carte blanche with their music in our studios."

Mudie, on the other hand, says that as soon as apartheid barriers have come tumbling South African music will take off



Masekela: Left untouched after Graceland.

overseas. And he optimistically sees apartheid's walls crashing down quite soon.

All roads seem to lead back to Graceland, which has become to South African music what the Vietnam War is to the US psyche. It precipitated an ongoing crisis and might have done as much harm as good.

Mudie believes the scale is tipped towards the good: "Graceland made South African music look inward," he

says. "There has been far too much division. The Info Song drove wedges between musicians, but Graceland presented opportunities for South Africans. That can't be called irrelevant in music terms.

"Music should bring people together. It is an incredibly powerful force."

Yet Graceland was divisive as well, as Ray Phiri of Stimela discovered. Phiri was the target of much political vilification as a result of his collaboration with Paul Simon on the LP and the world tour of the same name. And Graceland threw into sharp focus the whole issue of the cultural

boycott and its many inherent contradictions.

I asked Mudie why Phiri was trashed whereas stars like Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, who were on the same tour, were left untouched. Mudie's reply was simple, brave and one that is seldom vocalised: "Sometimes people do not like to see others being a success."

Withers feels it is unfair to expect musicians to toe a narrow political line.

"The South African political situation is very complex," he says, "and most musicians are politically illiterate. The situation is difficult enough for politicians to understand."

Withers is vehemently opposed to the boycott and to sanctions — but he says he can understand why people do support such strategies.

"Look at Tommy Sands," he says. Sands was an Irish activist who conducted a hunger strike to the death in one of Northern Ireland's H-Block prisons. "There was an attitude of, 'I still have control over my own life if nothing else'. It's the only power he had left."

But while Withers understands the frustration, he also feels it is futile: "If you take away your power, then obviously you have no leverage left."

In the wake of Graceland there was also a flood of songs carrying political messages, mainly calls for the release of Nelson Mandela. It seemed as if every singer and songwriter in the country (and many outside) was set on extracting mileage from political issues. Voices from all corners claimed the phenomenon was borne out of sheer opportunism. A hopping on to a profitable bandwagon; a jockeying to be seen as "relevant".

Mudie disagrees. He feels there is a genuine sincerity behind all the sloganeering.

"People like Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse have integrity going back some time," he says. "The political songs are a sign of a reawakening. It's a case of artists, having established a power base through their music, exploiting that power base to reach an audience. Music is one of the last bastions of expression in South Africa."

Withers also believes entertainers are becoming more politicised.

Mudie has one major wish at the moment, and that's for a massive seminar on South African music. "We have been cut off from experience and information, yet we have enormous potential. We are unique in having a merging here of 'Third' and 'First' worlds. The music industry is continually updating, and there should be a get-together to share information.

"It is time there was a massive seminar for South African music including the whole industry from producers to artists."

"It's the issue of the moment." □

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One of South Africa's most recent and highly visible successes is a band with a strange name that sounds more like a tropical daquiri or a Caribbean folk dance than a musical group.

And meeting them is like running slap-bang into a Rio de Janeiro carnival (or street riot). In fact, if they were ever to go shopping together in town, any town, chances are they'd all be arrested under the state of emergency as a riotous assembly.

It's not easy talking to Mango Groove, the new hit group with the sledgehammer sound which has sewn the seeds of marabi madness among the masses. For one thing, there are 11 of them. For another, they never sit still for more than a minute at a time; they are bursting with the same sort of energy they display on stage. As a result, anyone trying to chat to the whole band at once is asking for neuron overload and only the most erratic picture of the way their lives fit together.

As a matter of interest, I asked them how they managed to get on together at all, such a crowd of disparate and hyper-tensive individuals. John Leyden, the group's bass guitarist and vocalist, didn't seem to think there was a problem at all, saying only "we get along remarkably well ...". Lead vocalist Claire Johnson, she of the '50s starlet looks, suggested a reason: "We split up our grievances" (whatever that means — when I tried to clarify the statement the chaotic conversation veered off on a new tack; something wildly inappropriate like Maggie Thatcher or the British queen's huge income or whatever).

But let's start more or less at the beginning. Mango Groove was launched some years ago. They were not an overnight sensation, in fact at the time the best thing they had going for them was their name, which evoked at least a kind of curiosity. As for their sound in those days, I must confess it doesn't ring bells in my head.

There were originally eight members in the band: Sipho Bhengu, Johnston, Banza Kgasoane, Alan Lazar, George Lewis, Leyden, Mduduzi Magwaza and Gavin Stevens. They were joined more recently by three robust and energetic backing vocalists.

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IN THE GROOVE

JIMMY BEAUMONT met Mango Groove, and found the vibrant, colourful band quite a riot ...

Anyone trying to chat to the whole band at once is asking for neuron overload and only the most erratic picture of the way their lives fit together.

The most visible member of the band is **Claire Johnston**, a petite and incredibly lovely platinum blonde with an hourglass shape and lips like maraschino cherries in Cape Velvet liqueur.

At the age of 10, she was appearing in shows like "Annie", the high-powered musical imported from Broadway. At the age of 17, she joined Mango Groove, but academically she was not idle in the ensuing four years, completing a BA degree in English and Philosophy.

Actually, this band has more going for it intellectually than the combined potential of most major universities. Another bandsman, **Sipho Bhengu**, is actually a teacher of music as well as a practitioner of what he teaches. He started playing guitar in the mid-50s and since then he has been through the mill, playing with people like Gibson Kente, Reg Msomi, Tom Ndaba and the African Jazz Pioneers among others. He changed instruments in the '60s, taking to the sax as

if he was to the tenor born, and he has brought out a solo album, "Thina". He derives his musical inspiration from US jazzman John Coltrane.

Then we also find in the Mango Groove ranks a man who is completing an Honours degree in political studies at Wits and who writes video soundtracks: **Alan Lazar**, who started his jazz/pop career at the age of 13 after years of classical training. At the age of 17 he co-founded the pop group Cinema, co-writing several of their hits. He graduated to higher things two years ago by joining Mango.

Banza Kgasoane, from Alexandra, who was brought up by a mother who is a gospel singer, took up the trumpet at the age of 10. He has played with artists like Ken Modise, the late Zakes Nkosi

and Sipho Mabuse.

Another band member from Alex is **George Lewis**, a guitarist who also plays drums and who joined Mango Groove in 1986. **John Leyden** is from Kitwe, Zambia, where as a child he developed an obsession with the pennywhistle, which forms the backbone of the band's distinctive sound. Leyden is a Masters student in Philosophy and is completing a dissertation on rationality and irrationality (wow!).

The composer of many of the pennywhistle melodies that characterise Mango Groove's songs is **Mduduzi Magwaza**, who once roamed the streets of Durban with sax player Teaspoon Ndelu and other pennywhistlers, busking for a living. Among the artists he has played with is Richard John Smith, who has since faded into relative obscurity. Magwaza also founded Bayete in the early '80s before getting into the Groove in 1986.

Drummer **Gavin Stevens** began his career in a Greek traditional band before joining alternative group Nude Red. Other than his musical involvement with Mango Groove, he is a sound engineer for a foreign television network based in South Africa and is also a freelance cameraman.

Then, finally (phew!), we have the three backing vocalists: Beulah Hashe, Marilyn Nokwe and Pumzile Ntuli, a lively, vibrant trio who have walked the boards with numerous acts, the most noteworthy being Stimela, before signing up with MG.



Footslogging around the music circuit for some years with no sign of success on the horizon failed to daunt Mango Groove as a whole. The band has been through more downs in its existence than it has ups. In '88 it almost played its last note after gigging around the country with still no apparent sign of a breakthrough, and the death from cancer of their trombonist, Big Mickey, was a major blow. Then Johnston developed problems with her voice, eventually losing it altogether before a tonsilectomy solved the problem.

But then came the Big Break that all musicians dream of; a major recording contract worth R1,2-million to produce an album of international standard.

The subsequent LP, titled only "Mango Groove", was produced by Alan Lazar, John Leyden and British producer Chris Birkett, who worked on it with the band for something like six months, eventually tightening up the sound and succeeding in giving it a world-class feel.

As Lazar says: "We spent a lot of time in the studio. We didn't want to rush things, and as a result we have a record that we are very happy with." The product was then snapped up by Tusk record company, which managed to outbid the competition, and the packaging was complete.

The band is understandably enthusiastic about the LP, which, they said, sold almost 10,000 copies in one week — 4,000 through one chain of outlets alone. It is little wonder the discerning music lover is enamoured with the product. It's one of

the most exciting albums to ever be produced locally, fielding a battery of hit songs such as "Dance Sum More", "Love Is The Hardest Part" and "Hellfire".

Straight away, thoughts turned to a tour of Europe, and Leyden confirmed that there were plans afoot to tour the Benelux countries and France, where South African music has developed a powerful reputation. This month was mooted as a possible date, but nothing was certain. The United Kingdom is not yet on the cards, but, as Johnston says, "we would really like to tour the UK because once you've broken through there the next step is the United States". And let's face it, the US is the mecca of musicians worldwide. As they say in the song, "New York, New York": If you can make it there, you can make it *anywhere*.

Why has the band become a success, besides the fact that they have the enthusiastic backing of a top studio and more than a million bucks?

Johnston, the impromptu spokesperson for the Groove, has a simple answer: "We are offering something completely different." Do they expect any flak in connection with the cultural boycott? Stevens bounces back with dry humour: "Oh, we were refused permission to play Nelspruit once ..."

But no, they are not expecting trouble. For one thing, they are a band with a political and social conscience, although, being musicians primarily, they do not flog the political horse to death.

Mango Groove ... bursting with energy on and off stage Photograph by Chris Chapman

The band is a member of the SA Musicians' Alliance (SAMA) and expresses allegiance to the progressive organisation's principles of freedom of expression and association, and its anti-apartheid stance. One of the most admirable ambitions of the band is to be "part of South Africa's new post-apartheid culture".

Mango Groove speaks as one person when they denounce the NP government's repressive policies, and why should their career suffer just because someone they disagree with entirely came up with a ridiculous ideology all those years ago?

Even their music is rooted in a history of reaction to repression. The bitter-sweet Marabi-kwela pop, as it is called, emanated via brass and pennywhistle from the black ghettos of the '40s and '50s when Sophiatown was a haven of non-racial culture. This was the music that first saw the institutionalisation of apartheid, forced removals, defiance campaigns and the razing of *Kofifi*. Changing the subject again, I ask them where they are going career-wise, and Johnston's reply is said with a laugh: "There are absolutely no reins on our ambitions!" Many a true word is spoken in jest ...

So, as the song says: "Dance sum more, man. Whats the madder with you?" □