

THE CULTURAL BOYCOTT still a thorny issue

by Sipho Jacobs

Barbara Masekela's recent visit to this year's annual Arts Festival in Grahamstown and the pending UN-sanctioned indaba in New York later this year on the cultural boycott has dampened expectations that the controversial five year-old boycott against South Africa may be lifted this year

Chief of the African National Congress' Cultural Desk, Barbara Masekela, has strongly emphasized the organisation's stand in the re-inforcement of the five year-old cultural boycott against South Africa.

In a speech delivered during this year's annual Arts Festival in Grahamstown last month, Masekela said the issue of the cultural boycott against South Africa is still valid and will remain as such "as long as apartheid persists."

Explaining her presence at the festival, Masekela said: "I'm not here, certainly to endorse the totality of the festival policy. We share all of the concerns which the Mass Democratic Movement has raised about this event. Rather I am here to enter into the on-going debate about events such as this. It is the policy of the ANC to encourage open debate with and within all communities, because we believe that all have the potential for change."

"We are at Grahamstown to bring our political perspectives to bear on these cultural issues because for us culture is not a separate category of life from politics."

She added that "the cultural boycott is a pathway, to allow the representative, democratic culture of the people out to the world, as much as it is a filter to exclude the poison of apartheid, and to prevent it from gaining credibility. The policy of the cultural boycott is still valid."

However Masekela refuted the idea that the boycott was destroying creativity through lack of "cultural exchange" between local and overseas artists. "By contrast, our vision is of a democratic, participative, inclusive approach. We do not wish to shut out contribution of any society. Nor do we wish mechanically to impose dogmatic categories or standards. Rather, we want to involve all the people in working out modalities of our culture: those who are presently voiceless, as well as the 'professionals'."

Masekela pointed out the role of supportive Government and other cultural organisations throughout the world, that have supported the boycott call against South Africa since 1982.

"Through our day to day work and through the gatherings we have initiated, most notably 'Culture and Resistance' in Gaborone, Botswana in 1982 and CASA in Amsterdam in 1987, we have supported South African artists who have been developing the voices and images of challenge and resistance."

"During our stay abroad, we have been sustained and heartened by support of the international community, and we have introduced to that community the vibrant riches of South African culture. Today, there is international interest in our culture — countries such as Japan clamour to see and hear us. That respect has been won by those of our cultural workers who have not been afraid to raise their voices against apartheid. Through the educative work of the campaign around the cultural boycott, the products of apartheid's apologists and toadies is universally scorned," explained Masekela.

Masekela's statement in Grahamstown, is viewed by many as an echo of

the stand taken by the ANC against Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour in 1987. Masekela then appealed to the international community to take action "that would go beyond condemnatory press statements and speeches at international forum, to hasten the demise of apartheid and stop the conflict promoted by the South African Government."

"We are not naive. We do not think that the cultural boycott will bring about instant liberation to South Africa. The colour-bar in cultural life and in sport and education shall be abolished," Barbara Masekela told *Africa Report Magazine* at the time.

Since 1985, the cultural boycott has been a thorny issue both locally and internationally. The call for a blanket boycott was taken at the time by 54 artists in the United States. The artists made their standpoint clear by grouping as a single voice. They called themselves Artists United Under Apartheid and were led by pop and rock guitarist Steven Van Zandt.

Initially the idea was to boycott Sun City in Bophuthatswana. But the boycott spread throughout South Africa, barring all overseas artists and sportsmen from performing in this country. The call was later joined by artists from several countries in Europe, including Sweden, Holland, Denmark, England, France as well as all countries hosting organised anti-apartheid movements.

Inside South Africa, however, the cultural boycott remains a mythical taboo, feared and avoided by many who don't even know the meaning of the word 'boycott.' Not even progressive organisations, including the South African Musicians Alliance (SAMA), could come out with a clear directive on the issue until recently.

"The cultural boycott was never intended to isolate the democratic forces of culture at home. Anti-apartheid culture produced in South Africa must be seen and heard world wide," said Masekela. The cultural boycott has also played havoc in the minds of local artists. Since 1985 actors and musicians have questioned the 'guidelines' of the boycott against local artists.

"We've never been given a clear guideline both by the progressive movements inside the country and the cultural desk in exile," said a band-leader who asked not to be named.

"At least, Barbara's statement gives us some kind of indication as to where we all stand as far as the boycott is concerned," echoed a drummer who also asked to remain anonymous. During an interview with *Radio 702's* Tim Mills, SAMA's spokesman Jabu Ngwenya confirmed that the cultural boycott is still in force.

Ngwenya, however, told *JIVE* recently that the issue could be addressed during a meeting to be held at the UN head-quarters in New York towards the end of the year. "We hope to be given an update of the outcome of the UN's Anti-Apartheid Committee in which highly-placed ANC representatives, including Ms Masekela and possibly a representative of SAMA will attend."

Till then, music fanatics in this country will just have to hang in there and wait! ■