



1524 words

Logo: OPINION

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC IN NATAL ... WHERE ARE WE HEADING?  
by Dave Marks

Natal - and Durban in particular - faces a commercial and cultural music crisis. I don't want to wax cynical, but music events in the past few months have done Durban's "image" a lot of harm. To be blunt the disorganisation at a number of music events has led many to believe that "Durban will never get its act together".

Bad sound, indifferent organisation, bad debts and fly-by-night promoters have all added to this perception. Only the musicians (in most cases) had their act together. When will Durban stop trying to reinvent the wheel every time there is a concert or festival to organise.

There is no shortage of skilled people who could organise a music event in Durban. Who and where they are is sometimes a well-kept secret - the result, due to this lack of communication, is that Natal sometimes becomes the proverbial sitting duck every time a festival or holiday period comes around.

It would be worthwhile to arrange a meeting of music minds as soon as possible: PROMOTERS, SOUND COMPANIES, STUDIOS, MEDIA, TECHNICAL, AGENTS AND MANAGERS, interested BUSINESS PEOPLE ... an informal get-together to see what we can do to start creating this much talked-about "infrastructure".

There is a lot to discuss. We're a breath away from having sanctions lifted. We have the talent and the skills on all levels. We may have a problem with casual venues, but it's not as big a problem as we have with organisation and communication.

#### TALENT

Some of the best musicians and bands in the land are from Durban/Natal. We have the only JAZZ and POPULAR MUSIC UNIVERSITY COURSE in the country. We have a progressive and active cultural movement, and we have great commercial potential that could be a boost for the local economy in general, the tourist trade and the informal sector.

A code of conduct and an ethical, mutually agreed set of operating standards and basic technical requirements should be drawn up for anyone who wishes to stage or present a festival or concert in Natal ... it's a pity to even suggest such a move, but something must be done to prevent Durban getting the short end of these "deals".

We don't only lose money and credibility, we lose PEOPLE .. talent which can't wait to get away to Johannesburg, Cape Town or "overseas" where their profession is better protected.

#### INFRASTRUCTURE

Millions of rands are spent annually on music and musical equipment in this region. It's no secret that RADIO and the AUDIO CASSETTE will remain the primary source of entertainment and information in Natal for at least another 10 years - we don't even have a tape plant.





Well-equipped recording studios struggle to survive, while one Johannesburg-based record company spent over R50 000 in 1990 transporting bands from this region just to record in Johannesburg.

There are approximately 17 radio stations in the PWV area serving approximately 7 million people. Natal has basically two stations and one independent serving 7.5 million people.

There are countless entertainment magazines in Johannesburg, most of which are sold to Natal.

Record and tape sales in Natal make up about 75% of the total local music sold in the country, and we have about two (very small) record companies (Jo'burg has 30), four recording studios (Jhb over 250) ... yet Durban is Africa's biggest port and a prime international holiday resort.

Cape Town has gone a long way to establish a local music infrastructure with places of entertainment, means of communication and a healthy cultural and commercial music economy.

## OUTCASTS

Keith Lister, a director of one of the most successful recording and performing groups in the history of SA music, the SOUL BROTHERS (Natal musicians who are now Soweto-based), puts it this way: "The basic fact as I see it is that Natal, while constituting a massive market and a loyal record-buying market and radio-listening public is not treated as part of the mainstream of the SA music industry."

KEITH, as an ex-executive publisher of such mass circulation publications as Drum and City Press, concedes that there is "an intense anti-Natal bias in all existing media ..." despite the fact that the viability of these magazines depend on sales in Natal and on PWV sales to "Natal expats".

"Natal is virtually ignored by the media with one or two exceptions," claims Keith. "Much of the music industry is so inefficient and corrupt that it is almost impossible for new artists or small new companies or producers to break through into the mainstream on their talent and effort."

## CULTURAL BOYCOTT

WHEN THE CULTURAL BOYCOTT GOES, WHAT ROLE WILL LOCAL MUSICIANS PLAY?

After years of international isolation, what international promoter will risk a Durban festival, caberet or campus circuit? Will there be more opportunities or more exploitation?

Without any cultural "infrastructure" to speak of, what professional "infrastructure" can we offer?

"What is needed," says Lister, "is an overall strategy which will take account of the following environments:-

\* PRODUCTION - at all levels, studio, tape plant, warehousing, distribution etc.

\* Marketing - access to media and strategies to overcome institutionalised corruption

\* CONCERTS - a far-reaching series of appropriate circuits throughout Natal, especially in rural and remote areas ..."

If we don't have the administrative means, or venues to accommodate our own stars, what on earth will we be able to offer those international artists who have had access to the best technical and administrative facilities the music industry in Europe and the Americas can offer?



MUSIC NEEDS SPONSORS

One possible solution would be to understand that like sport, music needs and can benefit from sponsors - it can no longer survive on the gate alone. Twenty years ago you could hire a band for R250 and hire equipment for R150 per night. Today you pay well over R1 500 for a reasonable act, and almost the same for equipment - in those days you paid R120 for a ticket for a festival and R5-R10 in a club. Today we're still paying R10 per ticket and the cost of living has risen ten-fold.

Despite the boycotts and the confusion as to how they are applied, many local artists still manage (and have been for years) to grace the stages and festival grounds of top international venues - yet when they return home there is hardly a venue they can perform at. Some examples of popular local acts who perform successfully overseas are NOISE KHANYILE, LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO, SIPHO MCHUNU, THE SOUL BROTHERS, SARAFINA etc etc. ... all "home boys/girls" with no place to play in their own backyards. So how then will we play host to those musicians who would like to visit, or who plan to return and settle? Lets hear from all those with ideas on how we can get our act together and out of this dilemma. For years we've been involved with the struggle to destroy apartheid and build our self-esteem ... now lets get stuck into developing our culture, and get out of this habitual idea of destruction.

WEAPON OF CHANGE

We have a lot to be proud of. Maybe we just don't know how. For one thing music as a political weapon could now become an instrument of change and a means of earning a living for those who aspire to be professional. Musicians and music can play a constructive role in helping build bridges and create employment among communities. I know we've all heard this same old tune before, but music has the ability to bring people together ... it transcends all political, spiritual and geographic barriers.

Lets hear from those of you whose main means of communication is their voice or a musical instrument ... lets get our act together before we lose out on this historical opportunity to be part of bringing music back to South Africa; we must try to form a union strong and capable enough to be heard and to avoid being exploited.

In SA, a musician is still classified as a vagrant ... and with the way music and musicians are "used" by politics and business, it's no wonder we aren't taken seriously ... they use your tunes and your influence through music to sell their products and policies ... yet we are VAGRANTS.

MANA certainly has an important role to play, not only to change the circumstances under which musicians must work, entertain and communicate, but also the public perception and local structures that make it difficult for a music culture to survive.

It's not all that serious ... after all most of us just want to rock 'n roll or listen in peace.

quote...

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