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Peany Stewardson

UNLESS radio can break down into manageable and viable economic entities, the potential for the expansion of the music business in Natal is not going to develop.

This is just one of the concerns expressed by 3rd Ear Music maestro David Marks, who has been working for more than twenty years towards the establishment of a local infrastructure for the industry.

He accuses the media of "virtually ignoring Natal" despite the fact that 80 percent of the country's music sales originate here.

Mr Marks says that in the PWV area there are 12 Johannesburg-based radio stations serving seven million listeners, whereas in Natal the same number of listeners tune in to Radio Zulu, and Capital is the only other local alternative.

He feels strongly about the corruption, lack of professionalism and "something rotten in the state of Denmark" perception of the industry but says that local performers have to go through existing infrastructures and take their chances.

"I've seen great talents die a death overnight because the radio stations didn't play their records", he says. "With the proper infrastructure we could eliminate this kind of thing."

The word "infrastructure" crops up often in conversation with this quietly-spoken, youthful-looking man who has shared centre-stage in his day with local and international giants such as Johnny Clegg, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, John Lennon and Rod McKuen.

His frustrations with the industry have recently been somewhat appeased with the announcement of the creation of a Natal music academy to entrench indigeneous styles and skills.

"It's a matter of immediacy that the academy preserves our musical culture", he says.

He has gone a long way to achieving that end himself. Born in Cape Town to a poem-writing mother from whom he attributes his "way with words", he was educated at several schools before finishing up at Witbank Technikon.

From there he became a learner miner official, studying at Wits for three months of the year and spending the other nine underground.

Being of a liberal disposition and, by his own admission, "something of a radical", he survived an entrenched right-wing environment by reason of his music, without which, he says, he might have had a very difficult time.

Three of his chart-hitting songs were actually written while he was on the mines, and he was always in great demand at the company concerts.

He says that much of his racial attitude was shaped during that time and considers his mining days a positive experience.

In 1967 he left to look for new gold on the hotel entertainment circuit, where he was one of the few artistes of the time, like Jeremy Taylor, using their own material in their performances.

"I got into the business more by design than by chance", he says, explaining his sudden metamorphosis from performer to businessman. "As a performer I found it increasingly difficult, on the hotel circuit, to do what I needed to do."

He said that the lack of infrastructure in the industry quickly became apparent in the inefficiencies of a system that had its share of breakdowns, unscrupulous promoters and organised chaos.

At the same time, his song-writing had taken off to the extent that some of the country's major artistes were recording his material, which had a strong sixties "folk" influence.

A year spent training as a sound operator in the States led him, quite inevitably, to Woodstock and a role in musical history.

Durban's Third Ear Music became reality in the late sixties, describing itself as an "alternative" record company and music publisher. In his role as managing director, Mr Marks has orchestrated the company in playing a pioneering and catalytic role in South Africa's contemporary indigenous music scene.

The fight for autonomy from Johannesburg is an ongoing one and 3rd Ear is presently "divorcing" itself from its association with Tusk Records.

"The time has come for Natal — without alienating itself from Johannesburg — to go it alone and promote more local development and investment," he says.

"The fact that international acts can't earn a living here is indicative of the lack of infrastructure, but there's no shortage of financial potential and we shouldn't have to rely on an imported culture.

"There's a gap between commerce and culture that we have to address.

"The way the industry is monopolised by the majors makes it very difficult for local talent to come out on its own strength, which has caused two major problems. Firstly you have artistes hiding behind political slogans, and then you have the insistence on a commercial or public veneer which has been tried and tested in the States or Europe. These people paint a false picture of the industry."

Mr Marks says that music is still perceived by many people as "a luxury", which is the exact antithesis of the movement behind the establishment of the music academy. He says that the creation of the academy will have the "enormous potential" of creating work in Natal.

"With the lifting of sanctions will come the outside investors, but we want to convince local business of the viability of what we are doing."

He is anxious to see the industry develop in a holistic sense and says there is no lack of South African middle management talent available.

"With the proper infrastructure we'd encourage more music lawyers into the industry for instance. At the moment I know of only four in the country.

"A lot of people in this business are failed performers and songwriters themselves and that doesn't make for a healthy situation. The academy is going to give us a much more professional image and provide a proper training-ground for everyone from the back-room boys to the actual performers."

The relaxation of the political situation had opened many doors for the entertainment industry he said, but there was a need to remain apolitical and retain credibility.

"It's important that we can be open and associate freely, and music is one of the best ways I know of bringing people together. It transcends all differences."

Curriculum Vitae: David Marks

Born: Cape Town

Age: 46

Marital status: Married with four children age 19, 16, 8 and 5.

Chairman of Music Association of Natal.