Sounding the Cape Music, Identity and Politics in South Africa

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First Interlude

Vincent Kolbe’s Childhood Memories

Vincent Kolbe was born in District Six on 19 July 1933. He was a librarian, an activist and a musician. As a librarian, he encouraged young people to read, and gave them access to material that could help them develop a critical mind. He worked at the Bonteheuwel and Kensington libraries where, during the last two decades of apartheid, and in spite of police surveillance and recurrent harassment, he hosted political debates and ideological discussion, transforming public libraries into “marketplaces for ideas” and “cultural centres” (Dick 2007: 709). He had to retire in 1991, due to poor health resulting from the tear gassing he had suffered during the struggle. As a musician, he played in dance bands and jazz bands and was one of the early exponents of be-bop in Cape Town, with Harold Jephta and Johnny Gertze. He participated in the creation of MAPP (Music Action for People’s Power) in the 1980s, was involved in the foundation of the community station Bush Radio, and was a trustee of the District Six Museum. Vincent Kolbe obtained diplomas in librarianship but was an entirely self-taught musician. He was awarded an honorary Master of Arts degree by the University of Cape Town in 2002. Vincent Kolbe was a walking encyclopaedia on Cape Town, District Six and the music of Cape Town. He was not inclined to writing, but was gifted with an inexhaustible memory and was a great raconteur. He was one of the first people I was directed to in 1992 when I started doing research on Cape Town’s New Year festivals and on music in the Mother City. We became very good friends, and I had the pleasure of welcoming him to my home in France in 1996 when he was invited to give a day-long seminar on “Identities in Cape Town” at the African Studies Centre of Sciences Po Bordeaux (the Vincent Kolbe remembering the songs he heard when growing up in District Six.)
Bordeaux Institute of Political Studies). As soon as I started working on the research project which developed into the present volume, I knew that I would have to draw on Vincent Kolbe’s memory. We agreed that the best solution was for me to videotape an interview with him focusing on the musics he heard during his childhood. For about three hours, he talked about the musics he was exposed to in Cape Town from the 1940s to the 1960s; sitting at his piano he frequently illustrated his talk by playing the tunes and demonstrating the styles that made a particular impact on him. The following interlude is a slightly edited transcription of the interview I videotaped at his home, in Southfield, Cape Town, on 31 October 2007. It should be read as a complement to the extensive interview he gave Lars Rasmussen (Rasmussen 2003: 102–114) and to the quotations included in Michael Nixon’s paper on “The world of jazz in inner Cape Town, 1940 to 1960” (Nixon 1997). Vincent Kolbe sadly passed away on 3 September 2010 after several years of courageously fighting cancer. I hope the following pages can do justice to his limitless knowledge of music history, his warmth and generosity, the humanity that made him a true Capetonian citizen of the world. His testimony gives an idea of the range of music that could be heard, live or recorded, in District Six homes during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the interactions that actually took place between musicians classified in different racial categories.

Quadrilles

They don’t play these quadrilles anymore, but the one I’m gonna play you is called “The Second Set”, that is the minor quadrille where all the tunes are in the minor … I remember some of those tunes because when I was a youngster, the bands were mixing up the whole thing, were making up their own combinations [plays on the piano]. They would end on a minor chord, that’s when I realised … that’s why a lot of the components of some of the square dancing were in a minor chord, because once upon a time there was a whole quadrille written in the minor key. It must have been quite interesting in those years to have a square dance in the minor key. It must have been a very formal occasion, with bow ties, which would have taken the rough edges off … I don’t know … But I was fascinated by the fact that the whole thing was written in a minor key. Then the band leader said, “This is the third part of the second set”, which is another set of the square dancing. I’ve got all that in writing in my files. He used to call “arm in arm”, “two in the centre” … I don’t know to what extent it’s been documented but the square dancing was BIG in my mother’s time and in my granny’s time … So what fascinated me with this piece is that it was written in D, played on the violin, and it changed keys …
“Tafelberg Samba”, the “Weasel” and “Mannenberg”

The military bands, my grandmother used to call them the red coats [sings a military march] … And in the parks, in the casinos, the brass bands used to play this, and I think when they had balls in the offices … and of course the working class would grab all this and have their own version of it, like jazz in New Orleans, or langarm after ballroom. So they used to play it quite firmly [plays]. This was played before my time, in my granny’s time or maybe my mother’s time, but I’ll never forget this tune … You know, you learn a lot of things … I learned to change the key and get the rhythm right … And later on, the brass bands must have played it like this … I still like it, there is something in it that I like [plays]. It’s cute. I still love that tune until this very day, because of the arrangement, and the change of keys gives the whole thing a lift … It was the nice part of this particular tune and it was kind of a significant moment in my life when I started to understand that there is more to this, it’s probably when I started looking at the world differently. But there are lots of examples of the square dancing, from the days when they played it on the violin, and then a lot of our boys went into the army … and they would learn to play the saxophone and after the war, they would play these things on the saxophone, but they still played it in the violin keys. Now an E flat saxophone played it in D because the banjo player, the bass player … they couldn’t play the flats. And I realised how clever these old boys were, it was like playing in a key that is not suited for your instrument, and they even taught each other that way. So, there was a composition that Abdullah Ibrahim’s band played later … it was the first hit of importance at the time of the 78 rpm in places like District Six … This guy called it the “Tafelberg Samba”, and it was so popular, and I think that’s got to do with the way it goes off beat or the way it jerks … [plays the original version, then Abdullah Ibrahim/Dollar Brand’s arrangement]. This was more or less the original tempo and people played it and played the records in every home and danced to it … I learned from 78s, my mother, my grandmother played these records, with bands or Bing Crosby, everybody bought those records. Now this local production just caught fire and all the banjo players used to play it. I don’t know what happened to the royalties, ownership and things like that … But I think it is a jaunty construction of the tune. The vastrap tunes weren’t done with this intricacy, it was more straight, like the violin figures, and they would play the violin patterns on the saxophone [plays], it was very straight, you could count the quarter notes and the half notes … That was quite tricky. Now the second part gets smoother [plays]. And people used to enjoy whistling it, it was like a challenge to articulate that. I think that must have been … it’s like be-bop you know … 
That was that recording, but the reverse side of that recording is the part that fascinates me and I remember it vividly. It was an old square dance piece of music going back to the days of the fiddle, when the guys would take a nursery rhyme and extemporise on it. Which must have been an old fiddle tradition all over the world. When I first heard it, I only heard the improvisation, I had no idea of what it was based on [plays]. It sounds like a very straightforward … like a square dancing piece, but actually it’s based on “The Cat’s Got the Weasel” [plays the original tune then plays it in a syncopated way]. Is that clever? That’s why I say that’s Cape jazz. When people talk about Cape jazz, and New Orleans jazz … Because that generation never heard anybody else, except what they were playing themselves. Or may be what the English immigrants brought here. And I noticed also that while there was so much extemporising going on even in that vein with the musicians at the time, they had these violin figures with four fingers, one two three four, one two three four [sings and demonstrates it on the piano] … That caught up, because very much of this old music was played with those licks so to speak. But I was fascinated when I subsequently realised that that was “The Cat's Got the Weasel” … That was the reverse side of “Tafelberg Samba”. Which people don’t remember today, but I as a young musician fell in love with that song. There must have been lots of examples in music history when the reverse side becomes popular and not the main side. That’s very much the case with “Mannenberg”. Abdullah [Ibrahim] had just converted to Islam, came back here and made an LP called The Hadj. It was a time when they would put one song on a whole side of an LP … It was very much a tribute to his pilgrimage to Mecca, which is called the Hadj, it was very well done. The reverse side, I think they made up in the studio. Everybody’s got a version about it. Monty Weber got a way of saying: “I gave the beat”; Robbie Jansen would say: “I did this”. All the guys who were into the studio that day … Abdullah would just mythologise and say: “Well we found this piano with the thumbtacks on it”, or something … But whatever, it must have been on the spot, which was very often what people did to put something on the reverse side. But the ultimate result is “Mannenberg”. That was in the 1970s when that recording was made. Someone said to me, I think it was John Mason, that thing sold in wide amounts in Johannesburg. I had no idea, because I was not there, I was not aware. But I know in the Cape, during the UDF years, people like Robbie Jansen used to play it at rallies. Abdullah was out of the country, and Basil Coetzee, who eventually got nicknamed Basil “Mannenberg” Coetzee … And it’s a time when the youth, or the movement got really integrated, a lot of black school children, a lot of black workers had mixed … the UDF movement was a very
non-racial movement, and a lot of Xhosa songs were learned at … I remember my
cchildren used to sing “Jonga, Jonga Malenga Jonga …”, when the sun goes down
or something [plays it on the piano and sings in isiXhosa]. It’s a popular freedom
song … It was big in Cape Town, my children used to sing it when they were at
primary school. It was a time when this cross-cultural thing was happening at the
political level. And I think “Manenberg” got popular in that environment. Because
it very much sounds like an African traditional kind of tune, not a District Six
thing at all … [plays “Mannenberg”]. But he does it in a much slower tempo and
it’s more dignified, on the record, and it’s much more meditative. But the way
Robbie Jansen and these guys played it, people used to sway to it at the rallies, and
they’ll all go mad … That was very much a rallying tune and it became almost like
the struggle theme song. But yet its township basis is here, and its three chords
thing. For me that was another example of how the reverse side of a recording
became famous and no one remembers “The Hadj” …

Two families

Childhood memories, I mean … I’m always fascinated when people say “I
remember when I was three years old” or something like that … That’s very faint
for me because of my origins. My father is an Italian, and my mother is a local
woman and they didn’t marry, so my grandmother who was widowed twice, and
she was with her second husband, and she had a small child, and of course her
older daughter gets pregnant, so she gets kicked out, like in an Italian family,
so she ended up living with my father’s relatives, and he was a young man, new
even to the country, and so on and so on … So my very first years were in that
fat, warm, emotional family, it was all about chocolates and pastry … nothing
stimulating [points his finger to his head]. But they did play gramophone records,
and I remember when I was a little boy, maybe when I was three, maybe my
memory goes so far back, there were lots of Italians visiting the house, and they
used to drink wine and to play records, whatever peasant music they had, they
would play. But I remember on one occasion them fitting me with this little fascist
outfit, black fascist little junior outfit, with this hat and the eagle on it, and I was
fussed as a little boy, because obviously the old man was a Mussolini fan, you know
he was a peasant. But I remember these people jumping up and down and there
was a lamp hanging down, they didn’t have electricity, it was a gas lamp with the
beams … and the shadows of the light on the wall … Maybe my memory is more
visual than musical. But as my life went along, the stepmother died, my mother
moved back with my grandmother, took me there, I was like seven years old or something like that, but the agreement with the two families was that I spend weekends with the family, and school days with ... so that I was the child, the grandchild of both sides, so that was a great time with that family that spoils you rotten, you get what you like and the other part of the family, you get a peanut butter sandwich and then you wait till your supper, and you go to school every morning and you do your home work and you can't say my stomach is sore and then stay home ... Quite a few years as a child, right throughout primary school, only when I became a teenager and I started developing my own thought, my own political thought, did I make a decision about where I wanted to be in the family. Because obviously there was a white/coloured situation as well, and they were at the two ends of the city. One was at the west end of the city, by the harbour, the other was at the east end, in District Six ... “The Music Goes Round and Round”

Another memory that goes back to the 1940s is the Sacred Heart church in Somerset Road, obviously it's a Catholic church, lots of candles, lots of incense, lots of organ music, church organ music, lots of immigrant families, they were all Catholics, the Irish were Catholics, the Portuguese were Catholics, the Italians were Catholics, the Philipinos were Catholics, there were black Catholics, Indian Catholics, and in this Babel of voices and accents, people spoke loud in those days ... And of course the church music was there but again I think it was more the smell and the visual, than the actual sound. So I can't call myself a child prodigy musically in any way, but I was surrounded by all these sensual experiences. But in the house, there was this gramophone that, as a little child, you winded up, and that was great. Papa spoilt me rotten. The only caning that I can remember is for swearing, and I promised never to do it again because of the Virgin Mary and I don't know what ... But they did play Caruso, you'd hear this voice, you'd hear this Italian organ, but also the younger people, the children of the old people, used to play Joe Loss, the English orchestra. I remember them putting on like novelty recordings, or maybe the hit parade of the day, because of the movies or whatever, and I remember one song, the first song I became aware of, that I remember was "The Music Goes Round and Round" [sings it] that must have been from a movie [plays it on the piano and sings]. That sounds very much like a nursery tune and maybe that's why it stuck. They played it over and over in the house, the family. And when I sang it I would go [sings the melody and adds oum
Vincent Kolbe’s Childhood Memories

papa oum papa oumpa oumpa oum papa at the end] and they would say: “No, that’s is not the song”, and I would say “Yes, that is the song”. And my godmother, who was my mother’s cousin, Angelina, she puts the record on, and she says, “My god, but the child is right” and I felt … I was cleverer than the adults, it was the accompaniment [demonstrates on the piano, the oum papa part, underlining the dissonance] that is a be-bop chord. Maybe Charlie Parker or Thelonius Monk grew up hearing it, I don’t know. That’s when I got my first jazz chord in my head, I realised that years later. So that tune is special to me in my memory, “The Music Goes Round and Round”.

“Sorrento”

And of course, “Sorrento” was sung to death [sings: “Torna Sorrento, torna” … ] and it was one of the first tunes I actually learned to play [plays]. Now why I think I liked it is because there is also a change of key that takes it from minor to major. I started to play at my old people’s home, when I was visiting because I learned to play in the youth club, there was a piano in the hall of the church and that’s how I got started, I never grew up with one [plays “Sorrento”]. It does something to you when it changes from minor to major and as a child you feel that. And you get a sense of minor and major and of the feelings it evokes inside people [plays]. That’s the song, but of course the way people did it [ends up the melody with a strong tremolo on the last chord], that always put the house down and you identified that with the song. So “Sorrento” has got a place in my memory for me because of this kind of dynamic, for me: sense of minor to major, and that grand ending. That was also a childhood memory …

Brazil

I think the next thing that happened to me was that … Oh the military bands … That part of the city, people came by ship, there weren’t aeroplanes, so there was always a military band coming from the harbour, greeting the sailors or the soldiers, or whatever procession is in town [sings various parts of a military arrangement], and Salvation Army bands, and you’re looking at the big thing as a child, and it was all: “oof boof boof boof”. I can’t say it thrilled me, but when I went to the other end of the city, District Six, I went to the local Catholic school there and I had a lot of musical experiences there. First of all, they were playing other music in the house, my uncles worked on the merchant ships and they brought a
lot of recordings or people home, and it was not just Italian, many of them were Brazilians and they played these records to death. And my mother having grown up in that environment could speak like four languages, just by association and so did my grandmother. And so whenever my uncles had a problem with … translation … I remember the Portuguese say: *pergunta para Isabella, pergunta para Isabella*, saying “ask Isabella”, that's my mother, and my mother would say: *vão em bora, vão em bora*, or my grandmother, “go away the party is over”. As a child, you pick up these little things, people communicating in broken English, broken Portuguese and so on and so on … But one of the recordings that stayed up in my memory is a Brazilian recording, a few of them. One is called “*Paraquedista*”7 and the other I don’t even remember how it is called. But I can actually repeat the words, not that I was taught because when you hear it so often on the record, it registers, and maybe you mispronounce it, but I’ve often put it past Portuguese speakers, and they said to me: “We know what you are saying”, this is not too bad. I put it past a Brazilian once and he said “No, that’s not Brazilian, that’s old Portuguese”, this goes back to the 1940s, it says something about the way the Brazilian language has developed since the 1940s. And I still enjoy it because my mother’s younger sister was two years older than me and we grew up remembering our childhood, and she would say: “Vincent, play ‘*Na minha casa manda eu*’.” She’s dead now, and I would [sings the song]8 … There is always a guy with a high-pitched voice on this recording, it was not like down there, and maybe as a child, I liked the up there because the Bing Crosbys were down there, and when you are eight years old, it does not appeal to you. And there is again something jaunty about the melody [plays and sings in Portuguese: “*Na minha casa manda eu*”]. That was the introduction, with the trombone. And then there was a time when the record stopped, and that for me was dramatic: “*Pois sim*” which must mean shame or something9 … I think his wife must have beaten him or … It was about a bloke who didn’t bring his money home and his wife hit him with a pan, and then the music stops and we used to say, “*Pois sim*” … I hope it’s right. But I do remember the introduction.

The ship connection

There were also other songs that people liked because they played them over and over again, because it was good to dance to. And I hear even today, I have a Cuban record, and they still play this tune, so it must be bloody old [plays it]. What must have impressed me at the time … it was an easy rhythm [sings it] and they would dance to it, but I think what I started hearing was chord changes [demonstrates
on the piano]. And that's very South American, very Brazilian, this kind of chord sequence. And I think that stuck with me the way ... I started hearing ... you stop listening to the melody and you start listening to the harmonies. And these were old 78 recordings, and it was not like modern hi-fi things so you really had to listen [plays, coming back to the bridge of the tune several times] and I realise now, because they would also play local music, like “Tafelberg Samba”, they even played square dances on records, there is so much similarities between the rhythms and the lines, because I started picking up [plays the Cuban tune], there is something universal about these lines [melodies from Brazil, Cuba and South Africa] that either developed independently or because it’s a class ... you don’t know why people do what they do ... why it's the same all over the world: carnivals, and the lines and the voicings, and the beats. The chord changes are very much [plays the Cuban tune then “Mannenberg”]. That's why I get impatient with those harmonies, so I will go about the [plays “Mannenberg” with added chord changes] till it gets musically interesting for me, otherwise I fall asleep. And I think that's the difference with township music and with port music, there is a kind of playing with minors and majors, and change of keys, and chordal things. I think the guitar must have a hell of a lot to do with it, because the guitar travels with ships, and people sitting on ships with guitars and exchanging ideas. And of course, there was a lot of that, my uncles and their friends playing [mimics people playing the guitar], playing Mills Brothers\(^{10}\) and things, and Brazilian ... and I think the shipping lines must have connected all the stuff. Somehow, because of the guitar you get this [plays chord changes on the piano]. Now that's not township chord structures, that's not rural, urban, I don't know what it is. Some other magic, but I would like to argue that what we ... what I am doing here is the result of me being a city kid. I never grew up ... you know there were no townships when I was a child, not even black townships not really, not to the extent that there are now, not really, most black people lived in the city. And I believe that Temmy Hawker, his daughter says he travelled around the world like seven times, as a merchant seaman. He’s a migrant guy who came to Cape Town, he could have been of mixed parents, because his surname is Hawker, that’s Scottish, lots of Scottish men slept with Xhosa women; he came here and married a coloured woman from District Six and her brother was a piano player called Glyder, I remember him, he used to sit on the back of a lorry advertising Cavalier cigarettes, Glyder, and then he worked on the merchant ships, and came back a jazz musician and taught Christopher Colombus and Jimmy Adams and everybody. And I think this has got to do with what he awakened here in the townships, in Langa, and all those places,
I think it all goes down to guys like Temmy Hawker who brought the outside world into the townships, and jazz …

**Victor Silvester**

My mother used to do ballroom dancing, so … Victor Silvester\(^{11}\) [plays] … Lots of harmonic changes here, Cole Porter and all that stuff came into the house with Victor Silvester. I used to listen to the bass line [sings: poom poom poompoomponm]. I loved listening to the bass line and the melody line, and I eventually picked up the voicings without knowing what I played, it was like having a linear … like what they used to have in Elizabethan times, this is lines interflowing, and I still play like that today. My friend, with whom I play, asks me: “Show me the chords”, and I say: “I don’t play chords, I play lines, interweaving lines, the voicings.” So all that stuff was there but I remember the Victor Silvester because they used to change keys a lot in the Victor Silvester recordings, my God, they used to … [plays, underlining the chord changes] he did a lot of that in his recordings and I became conscious of that and later they told me it’s modulation … And then the other thing that fascinated me: my grandmother said, “There are two pianos playing”, and I said, “What, two pianos?” and I started listening and there’s a piano playing the tickling notes here [the treble] and there’s a piano playing down there. But the strict tempo, the variety of tunes, and the interesting harmonies educated my ear in such a way that, as God would have it, in 1974, when I went to London for the first time, they were having the ballroom dancing world championship in the Royal Albert Hall, the finals. So I said, “Let’s go”, and these people said, “You’re crazy this place has been booked up months in advance, this is the finals of the world’s ballroom championship”, then they said, “I think someone didn’t turn up tonight, I think there’s a place on the stage behind the band.” Believe me, and I sat behind the Victor Silvester band and I watched these two pianos interweave, and watched the two pianos play, and I wished I could thank my grandmother, and I said, “Thanks Ma! I can see what they were doing now.”

**Opera and dance**

They [the members of Vincent Kolbe’s family and their friends] were not musically educated people, but they had an ear, especially my mama. I remember my mama used to sing opera and Jeanette MacDonald\(^{12}\), home style, they just sang that
because it was the popular tune of the day, of the films and … they still had opera, there was an opera house … My mother bought all these Benjamino Gili and Arturo Toscanini, she used to like to say the words, their names “Benjamino Gili”, “Arturo Tosca …” or something like that you know. She and her friends used to talk about them, and they used to play these ten inches of Jascha Heifetz. My mother thought she was Jewish, I thought we were Jewish, my mother worked for a Jewish hostel in town and I grew up there, and they gave me a hat and I had a ring and I was circumcised, and years later I discovered I was a Catholic, my mother was not a Catholic. All these sounds came through my family’s favourite music … They also taught you to dance, you must learn to dance. They were always looking for male partners, so at 14 I had to learn to dance. This was family recreation after a day’s work, during the week and during week ends. We were not a drinking family. You’d rather speak to my grandmother, she had six big sons, all fishermen: “My boys don’t blow smoke in my face!”, so they put up their cigarettes when their mama was in the room. But very austere, you go to school, you do your homework, you eat one peanut butter sandwich, it was not like the Italian family. There was big rivalry between the two families. Comes the weekend and my papa went: “Look at him, look at him, they don’t give the child food! Give the child food.” And they gave me food, chocolates. And Monday, another child would come to school and bring me something that they made for me, because my other granny don’t give me enough. It was great, it was great being a boy in that time …

Organ pedalboard

So, going back to the music of the house: Edmundo Ros, Victor Silvester, the Mills Brothers, and these musics on the ships, very much played, and the square dancing … Now, I’ve got to go to school, I’ve got to go to church, there was not really a school choir; people would just stand up and sing Irish songs, because all the nuns were Irish, all the teachers were Irish nuns [sings “Molly Malone”, “Glorious St Patrick”, “God Bless the Pope”]. Sometimes we jazzed up the songs, and the Sisters would say: “Stop that!” … What I did like was being an altar servant, because I loved the smell of incense, I loved the candles, I loved all the garments, and the bell that I was ringing, but the organ fascinated me. In those days, we used to pray in Latin, so I know all my … [recites the Pater Noster, the Lord’s Prayer, in Latin], the mass was always in Latin, that was before it became vernacular. So the ritual is always the same, the sermon is boring, but I used to wait for the Sister to play the organ, because I used to listen to the foot playing on the pedal, and I said, “My God, you’re playing
"with your foot …” [sings a bass line]. But the hymns were very boring, all Mother Mary hymns [plays and sings]. That you learn from listening to the church organ. So that’s another bit of education that you’re getting there, you see.

Big bands and Christmas Choirs

On my way to school I used to pass a hostel for black migrant workers called St Columba¹⁷ and they always sang there. Sundays, going to mass, I hear these people sing their harmonies, the Xhosa hymns in harmony, and it used to sound fantastic to me, like Gregorian chant or something, and then of course there were other times during the week when I passed there going to the youth club, and they would all be singing, never instrumental music, always singing coming out of this hostel and that fascinated me. It was my first black experience as a child. My other black experience was … lots of these dairies and shops had yards at the back where the workers lived because there were no townships, no travel by bus and you must be up by six o’clock in the morning to work in the butchery or in the bakery. They always used to cook outside and always played records in Xhosa, and we heard this. Another black experience I had … there was a hall in District Six called the Wintergarden Hall, it was in a street called Ayre Street, and I think it was first settled by Scottish workers and then taken over by black people and it’s very much in the memory of old musicians of Langa, because that’s where they had a social centre for black people and they had choirs, choral groups, ballroom dancing and they had jazz. So you’d find the Merry Macs¹⁸, and Duke’s father¹⁹, and all those people Blyth Mbityana, and Henry Mokone, I actually met these people there, and they used to play ballroom, orchestrated ballroom, harmony orchestrated ballroom. The coloured bands could not play orchestrated ballroom, they used to play with a very Duke Ellington sound. But of course I used to wait for the marabi sound to come on, and that, you absorb that. I also absorbed a lot of the Christmas bands because they were either marching in the streets or practising at someone’s place and I was fascinated by the way they turned every hymn into a march, everything had to be marched. The Christmas clubs, choirs, was like: if you buy your cloths in bulk, you’ll have a suit and a sports jacket and a pants very cheap. And you play the banjo, the guitar, you get paid. So marching around the streets at Christmas time, for the Christians, I mean lots of Muslims played in the bands … I used to love especially when the cello player, when he played, he played “toom toom toom”, they put tape on their fingers; [demonstrates: plays a hymn on the piano with a “cello line” that sounds a bit like a boogie woogie figure]. They liked to syncopate it, the Christmas
hymns, which they didn’t do in church. Church was very straight but the Christmas bands would have the banjo [sings syncopated lines] and the people used to do this. It was just jazzing up hymns in street bands. And there were times when they would do a break, the music would stop and the whole band would stop [plays a kind of ragtime march]. And everybody in the street would respond and stomp their feet. It’s wonderful how music involves the crowd. And that was the Christmas bands experience. When they got to the house where they had to play, then they played seriously, without the beat. They played like the Malay Choirs [plays]. Then they go inside and they have cool drinks or tea, and off to the next house. And that was the Christmas Choirs. And it was fascinating what they did to hymns after you’d heard them in church, because there were no Catholic Christmas bands, they were more in the Anglican tradition. And the Boys Brigade always marched up and down the streets with their flutes and drums and stuff doing something very similar.

![A popular Cape Town dance band of the 1950s.](image)

**Temmy Hawker**

Then the dance bands were very popular because people used to dance every weekend, my mother and her family and them: the school dance, the church dance, the sports club dance, there was always a fundraising, and I was 16 and I could dance and they used to put me in long pants and I would go to the dance, and I would
dance with the ladies because they needed a partner and they paid my ticket. So I had to learn the waltz, the fox trots, the quick step … And that’s how I could hear the dance bands live, and this very Temmy Hawker that we speak about, I actually heard him play and I fell in love with his sound; [showing a picture of Abrahams and his Tempo Band] this is not his band, but this is a typical District Six dance band. All these men were in the army. And then after the war they would form a dance band with bow ties and play from music. There is a music stand to show that this is a literate band: “We play from music” and we wear bow ties. Very different from sakkie sakkie and langarm, it’s like very formal. Alf Wyllie, Johnny Wyllie’s father, was a member of that church and he had a barber shop and he also had a dance band … but he had Temmy Hawker as one of his saxophonists. And they used to play all the ballroom stuff. But as youngsters we used to wait for the jive, because that time the jive came up [sings “In the Mood”], and then we came to life as the young squad and we all took the floor and all do this and do that. And then Temmy Hawker would walk up with his saxophone and play the jazz licks like we heard on the recordings of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman and he’d have that jazz sound, and for us that was jazz. I didn’t know him personally, but when Alf Wyllie’s band with Temmy Hawker was there, we would wait for two … one was the jive, and Temmy Hawker would get up and take the solo and play like, I forget now who Glenn Miller’s star tenor saxophone was [sings the sax tenor solo on “In the Mood], we used to love it and I used to imagine myself playing the saxophone. The other thing we waited for … there were always novelty numbers like mambili, it was very popular with everybody, it wasn’t just for black people … like the “Wimoweh” kind of song you know [plays], as youngsters we did all that, and then of course Temmy Hawker would come up and do a solo; God, we went mad. That was a time when people integrated much more, and there were black people living in District Six, I’m talking about the 1950s now, 1940s and 1950s, because I turned 21 in the 1950s… Then I used to go to the Wintergarden. When the man in my street asked me to play in his band, my mummy said: “You’re not gonna play in this band because, they’re all drunk, all drunkards”, he said: “Madam, we don’t drink in our band” and I said: “Please Mama I want to play in the band”. OK. So I joined them and that band took me to places I would never have been to … Wintergarden Hall in Ayre Street was one of them, playing in hotels, playing for picnics in the bush, playing in private houses, just because you were part of a band. I could see everything, from dagga smoking to … all life, you name it, people always needed a band, wedding parties, whatever. And that’s the whole story, the social settings, the gangsterism that you learn to deal with. One of the tricks I learned from Mr Wyllie, they had the
Drill in town, and the piano was on the corner of the stage and there were glasses of wine and people used to pass … that was the bar, you could buy a drink and go and dance. And there was always someone looking at you over the piano [with a strange gaze]. And Mr Wyllie said: “Look we’re not gonna get out of here. I’ll tell you what. I’ll pack up the drums, I’ll continue playing the bass drum but someone will take the other parts of the set, so when you leave, you just carry the drums and you run out, the banjo player will keep going, the bassist he can pack up, but Vincent, you must play till the end. So people danced and they drank and he said attack the keyboard, don’t be afraid” [plays forcefully a chord progression]. I really banged on that old piano and it resonates because there is no amplification. He said: “Put your foot on the pedal”, you “vamped” as they say …

Carnival and Coons

The carnival of course was the big one, we all wanted to be in the carnival, and our mothers said, “No, no way”, because the carnival was about drug dealers and drug takers and respectable people don’t join the carnival. But we all could play our carnival in the houses and in the streets, on tins and on spoons, and we made our little stands and marched on … as kids we just do it as a lot of other kids do it. But, this is the part I like to tell, when I started playing in dance bands, you play a whole range of music in the dance bands, from European to American, to black, to Malay Choirs, because of the city you live in. And when you play at a Jewish wedding, you must play “Hava, Nagila”, but at a Greek wedding, you must play Greek music. You know a band gets booked by various people and you have to play Afrikaans music, jazz … At one stage an Afrikaans boereorkes asked me to play with them. It was part of your experience … But I always studied part-time, playing piano was a weekend thing, a great hobby, I also used to play football a lot, I was a very busy young man. But getting together with your pals, and getting a chance to play in a band was always great. It was like being in a cricket team, you don’t practise, you just go and hit the ball. So the carnival was the big one. When I started playing in Mr Matty van Niekerk’s dance band, they used to be booked for the Christmas Choirs, for the Malay Choirs … you play saxophone, everybody books you, for the dances, for the carnival … and Mr Matty van Niekerk used to tell me, “You see these respectable people, with the bow ties, that’s floating like if they were royalties, wait until 11 o’clock, when they get drunk, the Coon comes out”, and it’s just like that. Because, he tells the band, “OK, carnival time” [plays a carnival tune] and people go mad and he says, “You see the coloured is coming
out now”. That was his comments and I was a youngster and I realised … culture confusion, identity confusion, what music does to loosen up people, I started realising the power of music. You had those very smart things, bow ties on men, starched shirts, ladies on their arm and they were playing like some respectable ous [fellows, people], because: “We’re not Coons, we’re respectable people, coloured people, respectable, we’re teachers”, and stuff. And Mr Matty van Niekerk used to say: “Don’t worry Vincent, 11 o’clock, when they got a few drinks in, you play carnival music, then the Coon comes out of them”. So the last hour was always carnival time, and the banjo played [demonstrates on the piano] and the people went “ooh ooh ooh” … And even white people used to do it, this is the interesting thing. You play for a Jewish wedding, and you play carnival music and they’re all out of their thing, they make like Coons. The trouble with the carnival here is that it’s got a stigma as you well know. I don’t know how it is in other countries, but the carnival was so stigmatised … Yet people internalised it and identified with it. Every Christmas time, there is a plane coming from Sydney, Australia, with like 60 expats on it, with 60 people or … they come to New Year’s Eve dance, just to have that have kind of party, and that says a lot about the power of culture and identity and all that stuff …

And of course, if the house didn’t have a piano, they used to give me a piano accordion and I played the piano accordion, just the keys, I didn’t play the buttons. We also played a lot of picnics, we played in the bush. People were dancing and when we finished the gig, they said: “Vincent, you’re gonna play with us, you’re gonna play with the Nagtroepe”, Caledonian Roses, Young Stars. Rugby clubs were also Malay things, when we used to play, we would play outside the house and sing the liedjies … I can sing “Roesa” for you from beginning to end, but the way I learned it as a youngster. “Roesa” is a Cape wedding song, why they call it Malay, I don’t know, but it’s in Afrikaans. And every year they used to have a rugby match on the Green Point track between the Young Stars of Bo-Kaap and Caledonian Roses of District Six, it was supposed to be a charity match, but so many blokes went to hospital after each match … And each team would have a band playing opposite in the stadium, and we would march in with the drum major and take up our position to support the team and we would have music, like the varsity rag. And these blokes are killing each other on the field there … That took me to places I would never have been, into picnics and functions I would never have seen. I made friends with Henry Mokone, and Duke’s father, but they were big guys, and Cups Nkanuka, he’s still alive, and that’s how I learned to play with black musicians or listen to them … And my memory of Wintergarden Hall is those lodges, that Free Masons hall, you
would have these poles and these balconies, and the wooden floors and the stage. And I'll never forget it, there was a piece of plank missing in this part of the hall. And the hall was crowded, and everybody danced around that hole, and nobody put their foot in it. I used to watch that hole: when is someone going to put their foot in it? … Little pieces of memory you have … But just to be there, with these guys … Duke’s father used to play barefoot, with that sax.

Langa

The next thing that happened to me. We used to have a youth club as part of the church where we used to have doo-wop, and all that, and we had concerts, “A night in Rio”. My other memory is, I was studying for librarianship and I had to go on duty as a library student, I used to go to Langa every Saturday morning, that was before you needed passes and all that stuff, I’m talking about the 1950s, before they made the laws, and I worked there every Saturday morning with the black librarian. It was built during the war time and that was the Langa Library, and I learned so much about what people read, what they study, the people of that community … But when I knocked off there, I used to go to the Langa Town Hall, which is built with the gables, the Langa Town Hall, where they had song and dance every Saturday afternoon, song and dance. I’ve read recently in some magazine called Roots that that comes from the mountains of the Sotho – oh God shut up! It was urban music, people have been living … They were born in Langa, they did not come from the mountains, they were born there, they were urban people, and they played records, and gramophones, and Duke Ellington, and Fats Waller, and they danced ballroom. And I remember going there on a Saturday afternoon and there was Thandie Klaasen23, and all these people, they used to be there, plus the local stars, and in the afternoon they had a talent contest, they had a microphone there and a piano and maybe a drums. And when I came from the library, they’d all come to me, “Vince, Vince”, because I could play the chords of at least “Blue Moon”, because there is a middle part that everybody is scared of, and I knew it. So I sat there and I played “Blue Moon”, person after person, it was like Pop Idol, then later on the adults would come, the big guns would come, the big bands, then we must make way for the adults. The dance is on, and I used to watch these guys play: Cups, Henry Mokone. He was a well-dressed guy, tie, pins, spats, he spoke English very well, trumpet, sweet trumpet sound, and then Blyth Mbityana played trombone. I went to buy a trombone, a second-hand trombone, old one, and I went to Blyth and I said: “I want to play the trombone, show me the
positions”, and I must practise, and I must play my three notes [sings: papapapa pa pa], and I would get up there with my trombone and stand with the band when they played the marabi, myself and Blyth, and I could play the trombone … in my own way … One day, I put Vaseline on it, one day the trombone stepped right over, broken. I took it to Jimmy Adams, they said he’s a clever man, he will fix it, those days, he used to drink a lot, he used to play a lot with the black guys, he learned from Temmy Hawker, Temmy Hawker taught him, he always preferred the black bands to the coloured bands, and to the langarm bands, he liked orchestrating for three or four saxophones. It’s a pity he’s dead now but Colin Miller did interview him, he was one of the older guys I knew. I went back to his house and I saw he made a lampshade out of my trombone, that was the end of my trombone career …

(No) piano lessons

All the churches in District Six had a youth club, to keep the children off the road, they always had sports: a soccer team, table tennis, and there was the park there, Trafalgar Park, you go to the swimming pool or play cricket, but to keep us off the streets and off crime. They always had a glee club and someone to teach this and to teach that, weight-lifting and what have you. People from the university used to come and teach there, drama, and this one woman Peggy Harper, she took myself and another chap to the university, she asked us if anyone of us wanted to learn ballet and we said that we didn’t want to learn ballet but music. So she took us up to the College of Music and to a very famous man Harold Rubens, he was a very famous Cape Town piano player, I think he became a professor at the College of Music. And we were looking at this place and you know we’re like youth, teenagers so he plays and asks, “How many notes am I playing”, I said, “Three notes, four notes.” He calls Mrs Harper and says, “I’m gonna give him a piano teacher”, and he gets one of his students, I’ll never forget the name, Mrs Phyllis, and he says, “You’ll get free music lessons” at the university. You know when you’re that age, you think you’ve arrived, you don’t think it’s a journey … I won. And then I went home and I didn’t go back. So she phoned, and I was working then, I was working in the library in the Gardens, and she phoned one day and said, “Won’t you come to the piano lessons?” I said “I haven’t got a piano” – “No, but we can organise it” – “But I am studying, you know, I’m doing part-time studies”, I made all the excuses in the book, I was not going to go to piano lessons. Because my plate was full, with girlfriends, I’m happy in the youth club, and playing you know [plays a boogie
woogie], who wants to know more than that at that stage? …

But as a result of that I do that to other people today. That’s why I got involved in MAPP. MAPP actually got scholarships for a lot of guys from the townships who now got their BMus. And at the Table Bay Hotel where I played, there was a youngster. The young guy was cleaning the floor, and he says: “I can play the piano, you know”; I say: “Yeah, come and play”, and he sits and he plays and you can see he is playing by ear [plays], and I say: “Where did you learn to play?”; he says: “This is gospel, we learn it in our church”; I said: “Have you got a piano?”, he says, “No”. He works here and he messes on the piano in the hotel, on a Steinway … So I say: “You know you are practising on the world’s best piano, and it’s very good for your ear because you’re hearing good music”. He says: “Yes, but I want someone to teach me”; and I say: “I can’t teach you, but I can put you in touch with some people”. So I went to the College of Music and I talked to Paul Sedres, and Paul gave me a number, and I gave it to him, I just hope that he followed it up … A youngster with talent, real talent. I said: “You’ve gotta get a better job, you can’t clean floors all your life.” He lives in Kraaifontein and he belongs to some Pentecostal Church, and that’s the story of his life … And it gives me great pleasure to do that, nowadays, now that I’ve got to this stage of my life, blessed with many good things, and some stupid things …

Harold Jephta and Johnny Gertze

On the road from the Catholic church was a Lutheran church, and I had to pass this church to get to the Catholic church. And one Saturday afternoon, I walked past the church, they’ve got these wires on the windows, and I looked inside, and there were people playing music, youth, with guitars and there was someone playing the bongos, and I had only seen bongos in the movies. So I went to stand at the door and I went to look for the man, and he asks me: “Do you want to join us?” I said “Yes”. He doesn’t know I am a Catholic: “Come inside, come inside”, and I met there, who did I meet there? Harold Jephta, Johnny Gertze, young guys, and I stopped going to the Catholic club, I didn’t become a Lutheran but I hang out with the Lutherans because they had bongos. And that’s how I made friends with them. And then all these things came together when I turned 21 and I got my library diploma and I got a job at the City Council, and I was playing now in a dance band weekends, and I was playing football, and table tennis, I had a life, and I had a girlfriend and all that stuff. And then Harold and I became friends, and I was invited to spend weekends at his house in Elsies River, so I started going
to Elsies River weekends. There was he and Johnny Gertze who was like 17 or 18 then, and a few other guys. I couldn’t believe that Johnny Gertze was real, because I went to his house in Bishop Lavis, and they were poor, and his mother used to have gospel services in his house, and he must have grown up with gospel. When you’re surrounded by singing people in a small house … because he could hear anything: we put on a record, anything, and he’d say, “Oh, that’s like this, it’s like this” [plays chords on the piano] or he takes the guitar and he gets it right or he takes the clarinet and he gets it right, and the off-beat, you know the be-bop off-beat, he just got it right, he heard everything, he was an amazing young guy to me. And they used to play Clifford Brown, they used to play Bud Powell, first time I heard all that stuff, Charlie Parker, they had all these records.

I spent every weekend with them. Johnny took up the bass only because there was none else to play the bass, that’s how he became a bass player. But he could play the trumpet as well, and the clarinet. It was an amazing experience to meet this guy. I had met people before with that kind of talent, Dougie Erasmus is one of them. He was in-between my house and my school. He had a Latin band. And we used to stand outside the window and listen to them … And I said, I want to play like that, because he did all this you know [plays licks on the piano] and I wanted to do that. So we started to have our little Latin band at the church. And he could do anything. I thought he was just amazing. And there was also Arthur Gillies, who also went to school with us, he was younger than us. He could hear anything and play it. Later on I met Tony Schilder, who is younger than us, he could also hear anything and play it. So I met people like that who had perfect pitch. Then I realised … until now I’m still astounded that I’m living in a part of the world where that talent prevails, until this very day. There’s something genetic, or something in the air here, but maybe also in Rio, or in other parts of the world, I don’t know, where this kind of individual manifest themselves. And you realise how amazing it is. And Johnny Gertze was my first experience of that.

At some point Mr Matty said, “Listen Vincent, you don’t want to play with us any more, you want to play with your friends”. I said: “Yes”. So he said: “I’ll get another piano player”. So I went to play with Harold Jephta and them, and I learned all the Clifford Brown stuff because of the records … and then we started a bop club in Waterkant Street, at St John’s Church, that’s all gone now. And the girls would wear the skirts, and we the be-bop stuff … and we would play be-bop music, and it became like George Shearing, and we imitated George Shearing’s tunes and so … It was really a wonderful period, we were all like young people and building a new culture …
Notes

2. Vincent Kolbe probably means the English 1850s nursery rhyme “Pop Goes the Weasel”.
4. Joe Loss (1909–1990) was a British violinist and band leader whose orchestra was very successful in the 1940s; his version of “In the mood” became extremely popular.
5. “The music Goes Round and Round” was composed in 1935 by Edward Farley and Mike Riley, with lyrics by Red Hodgson. Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra had a hit the following year with their arrangement of that song. A Betty Boop comic also contributed to making it a success.
6. The genuine Italian title of this Neapolitan song is “Torna a Surriento”. It was composed in 1902 by Ernesto and Giambattista de Curtis, and was sung by operatic tenors such as Mario Lanza, Giuseppe di Stefano, Luciano Pavarotti, but also by pop stars like Elvis Presley or Dean Martin. The manner in which Vincent Kolbe sings it suggests that his relatives played an interpretation by an Italian tenor.
8. The song Vincent Kolbe remembers is a samba titled “Na minha casa mando eu” (In my home, I’m the boss), composed by Ciro de Souza and recorded by Jorge Veiga in 1945 (http://homolog.ims.com.br/cgi-bin/wxis.exe/iah/; accessed 02/01/2011). It says, “At home, I am the boss / And none else / That’s why when I have spoken, everyone shouts: / ‘We all agree!’ That’s very well!’.” I want to thank Professor Carlos Sandroni, Music Department, Federal University of Pernambuco, who identified the song from a recording of Vincent Kolbe’s interview. Carlos Sandroni added that, if Jorge Veiga is a well-known singer, Ciro de Souza is not a famous composer and the song was not a hit in Brazil. He was quite surprised to learn that it had reached South Africa and that Vincent Kolbe could remember the words quite accurately, although he misunderstood their meaning.
9. Pois sim! actually means “Certainly not!”
10. The Mills Brothers, John, Herbert, Harry and Donald, formed a vocal quartet which became famous in the 1930s and 1940s for their imitation of instrumental sounds. They straddled the frontier between jazz and pop music and recorded with, among others, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and Cab Calloway.
11. Victor Silvester (1900–1978) was a famous English dancer and dance band leader who was instrumental in the development of ballroom dancing and music for ballroom dancing from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s.
12. Jeannette MacDonald (1903–1965) was an actress and singer who featured in many musical films and also, after studying with Lotte Lehmann, sang opera on stage. She contributed to popularising opera in the working classes.
13. Benjamino Gili (1890–1957) was an Italian tenor who sang in Naples, Milan and New York.
14. Arturo Toscanini (1867–1957) is considered to have been one of the most important conductors of the 20th century. He conducted, among many others, the orchestras of the La Scala in Milan and of the New York Metropolitan Opera.
15. Jascha Heifetz (1901–1987) was considered as one of the greatest virtuoso violin players of the 20th century.
16. Edmundo Ros (1910–) is a Trinidadian-born singer who led a popular rumba band in Great Britain that performed sophisticated arrangements on “Latin” rhythms.
17. The St Columba “Kafir Boarding House” was founded by Father Frederick William Puller of the Anglican Society of St John the Evangelist in 1886. With the night school established near Zonnebloem, it created the core from which developed a small Christian African community in central Cape Town (Bickford-Smith et al. 1998: 237; http://ssje.org/cowleymagazine/?p=39; accessed 02/01/2011).
18. The Merry Macs was, from the 1940s to the 1970s, Langa's most famous jazz big band.
19. Saxophonist and bandleader Christopher Columbus Ngcukana.
20. Texe Beneke, who solos on “In the Mood”.
21. “Wimoweh” is the name given to a song originally titled “Mbube” by his composer, Solomon Linda, released by Gallo Records Company in 1939. The song became extremely popular and mbube became a generic name for isicathamiya songs. “Mbube” was covered by numerous international acts, and, slightly adapted, became known as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”. On the history of “Mbube” and of the restitution of his artistic rights to Solomon Linda and his family, see: Rian Malan, “Where does the Lion sleeps tonight?”, originally published in Rolling Stone, and accessible on line at: http://www.3rdearmusic.com/forum/mbube2.html (accessed 5/07/2011).
22. The Paramount Dixies Band.
23. Thandie Klaasen (1931–) is a renowned jazz singer who sang and danced with the Harlem Swingsters and the Gay Gaieties in the 1950s, and toured Great Britain with King Kong in the early 1960s; on Thandie (sometimes spelt Tandie) Klaasen, see: Maureen Isaacson & Minky Schlesinger, Tandie’s Blues, the Life Story of Tandie Klaasen, Johannesburg, Viva Books, 1995.
24. George Shearing (1919–2011) is a British-born piano player and band leader who emigrated to the United States and became extremely popular with a quintet including a vibraphone and a guitar that played a softened but harmonically quite elaborate version of be-bop.