Johannesburg doesn’t look the way you’d expect. So-called ‘petty apartheid’ may be in camouflage, but the real oppression is ever more absolute. The city itself seems desegregated, yet certain realities are unavoidable. To get to the Kohinoor Store, you pass not far from the ultra-modern city centre. But behind the museum, there’s a street that’s a sort of invisible barrier: on one side, a mixed crowd, and large colonial buildings; on the other, African passers-by and Indian shops. Rashid Vally’s record shop is set up in one of these small streets. This forty-something Indian man, passionate about jazz, has an inventory that would be the envy of many a European or American colleague. He’s also a producer and, in that capacity, he’s considered responsible for bringing Dollar Brand back home to the South African public. And, more generally, Rashid Vally has strongly contributed to the dissemination of all of South Africa’s black music in its own land of apartheid, creating a platform for making the music known, and loved. For reasons easily grasped, the present article will only treat the subject of music; but this music speaks, and unforgottably.
It all started in my father’s shop. It was a grocery, but there was also a shelf of records, where he sold recordings of Indian music. At that time, I was listening to Louis Armstrong, Louis Jordan, that sort of music. I would bring the records to the shop and play them for my own pleasure, but people would come in and want to buy them. So I started selling some, so as to be able to buy new ones. By the time I left school, in 1956–1957, I suppose you could say I had started in the record business.

At the beginning of the sixties, I had also started to record South African dance bands such as El Ricas or the High Notes. They played what’s called *langarmmusiek* in Afrikaans, at “square dances” – of course these were coloured bands, but they were very little influenced by jazz. Amongst the musicians in those groups there was a great tenor saxophonist called Paw Paws. In that period soul music had become all the rage. So I recorded South African soul music groups. I was only drawn into the jazz life later on, after getting to know musicians like Gideon Nxumalo, Lionel Pillay, both of them pianists, and Early Mabuza, a drummer. They got together on Sundays for jam sessions, workshops if you like, and that’s where I heard Dollar Brand for the first time with a group called the Jazz Epistles with, besides Dollar on piano, Hugh Masekela on trumpet, Kippie Moeketsi on alto and Jonas Gwangwa on trombone. So I started to record jazz groups and, in 1971, I asked Dollar Brand to record for me, and we did the album *Peace* [*Dollar Brand + 2*]. Ever since, despite the fact that he lives in New York, we’ve remained partners. In 1974, whilst he was in South Africa for a time, we recorded “Mannenberg”, which was a huge hit in South Africa – in this country alone it sold more than 50 000 copies. The funniest thing was that after we’d finished the session I went looking around to several big record companies to offer them distribution of the record. I was only asking them for R100 advance, and they all turned me down, saying it was too much for a group of South African musicians. So I distributed the record myself, and in the first week alone I sold three or four hundred copies. The companies came back to me then, wanting to take it, but at that point I wasn’t asking one hundred rands …

With “Mannenberg”, Dollar Brand put paid to a number of myths. First of all, everything had been done so quickly; he composed the tune in the studio and the whole process took just three-quarters of an hour. Dollar never understood why it should take two months to record a piece of music. And secondly, until “Mannenberg”, South African jazz musicians defined themselves in terms of American influences. Dollar, though, although he listens to a great deal of American music, has always kept to his African roots. When he conceived “Mannenberg”, he mixed different currents of African music with South African jazz, and when the
record came out it was for many South African listeners like a breath of fresh air. People said, “Eh! That’s the sound I heard when I was a kid”. Naturally, the other musicians contributed to the success of that record – Basil Coetzee, who’s since been given the nickname “Mannenberg”, Robbie Jansen … and you also hear a second alto player named Morris Goldberg, uncredited on the sleeve notes, and he’s white. In any event, the group worked well. After “Mannenberg” there was a small musical revolution, as many groups started playing music in this township bag: Tete Mbambisa, Pat Matshikiza, Kippie Moeketsi ….

Today, most of the good jazz musicians have passed on or left for abroad. In South Africa there are very few jazz concerts and the musicians have very few places to play, with the exception of a few white clubs where they can play on weekends. Because of disco’s popularity, they’re forced to abandon jazz and play disco. Still, though, at my place people come in to buy disco but come back to buy jazz because that’s all I play in the shop. They discover this music and end up liking it. Other than that, we sell an enormous amount of swing music, maybe more than anywhere else in the world, and a little free jazz, but only to a small number of people. What sells is reggae, because the customers identify with the social aspirations found in the words of the songs. Anyhow, some of Peter Tosh’s albums have been banned here. Yes, and singers like Miriam Makeba and Letta Mbulu have always done well. I’m placing a lot of hope in a group called Movement in the City, led by the pianist and arranger Lionel Pillay. They’ve made two records with me.
Notes

1. This article was written following a short visit by the author to Johannesburg and Pretoria in 1981. Chris McGregor had advised me to try and talk with Rashid Vally. I went to his shop, asked for an interview, which he immediately agreed to give me. But he insisted that we go out and sit in his van, parked in the street, to avoid any trouble. The interview has been published in French and re-translated into English by Thomas Rome, a friend of Rashid Vally's, whose translation is reproduced here with his kind permission.