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REVISITING DOROTHY MASUKA'S HAMBA NONTSOKOLO: TALES OF WOMEN, MIGRANCY, AND JAZZ IN THE 1950S

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How does a classic song like *Nontsokolo*, discussed and newly imagined, tell us a larger musical story that South African jazz history has forgotten? This paper revisits the "classic" vocal jazz piece *Hamba Nontsokolo*, which was composed, performed, and recorded by the late Dorothy Masuku in 1954. In contrast to the focus in the existing literature on the lives of black jazz singers and the socio-political contexts of their time, this paper examines the music of the song and offers a new arrangement, as a process of creative research, suggesting how the "classic" may be re-imagined today.

This paper revisits the "classic" song *Hamba Nontsokolo*, composed and sung by Dorothy Masuka. *Nontsokolo* was Masuka's first hit record and is generally recognised as an important part of the blueprint for vocal jive music. The song marked her entry into the South African jazz scene, was arguably the most popular song of that year, and was later recognised as one of the most popular songs of the 1950s. The song remains significant because—along with a few other notable songs of the decade such as *Lakutshon' Ilanga*, *Meadowlands*, and *Ntyilo Ntyilo—Hamba Nontsokolo* has become part of the mould for what we now recognise as the sound of South African jazz and, in particular, jazz vocals.

Much of the existing literature written on vocalists, save for the work of authors like Lara Allen,[1] focuses on the lives of these singers and the social-political contexts of the time in which their songs were popular. This is important because apartheid South Africa erased this music, even as it was a crucial context to the music's making. In this paper, I examine the music of *Hamba Nontsokolo*—the nuts and bolts—using transcription and analysis. This work is critical in order to begin to highlight the musical significance of the songs of this era to the development of South African jazz. It will also help to begin a shift in the narrative surrounding these vocalists beyond the realm of the political and onto their musical contributions, which, however, does not equal a reversion to older musicology that falsely claimed an apolitical position for music. In doing this sort of analytical work, I aim to shift the focus away from the lives and celebrity of singers like Masuka, and onto the music they left behind. In this way, instead of seeing vocalist as mere custodians of melody, we can begin to recognise the importance of vocal music to the broader development of South African jazz, thus, exploring a larger and seemingly forgotten musical history.

Hamba Nontsokolo was recorded in 1953 and was released by Troubadour Records. The song featured the Golden Rhythm Crooners, an all-male singing group from Bulawayo. As to the origin of the composition, there are varying accounts. One of the more likely stories is that Stewart Cook was sent by Troubadour Records to sign a contract with Masuka's mother and, while in Bulawayo, Masuka penned the song and teamed up with the Crooners and Cook to record it. The lyrics deal with the migrant labour system that affected many black South Africans during the apartheid era. Unusually, the subject in this song is a woman leaving her loved ones behind to seek better economic opportunities in Johannesburg. This goes against the popular cultural narrative at the time, which depicted men as the ones who left home to work and women as those who waited at home for their return. That said, it is clear that women formed a substantial part of the migrant labour system as documented by authors like Belinda Bozzoli.[2] The lyrics of *Hamba Nontsokolo* describe being left behind as the character Nontsokolo (presumably meant to embody a person as well as a personification of poverty) heads to Johannesburg to seek out her fortune.

It should be noted that several problems can arise when transcribing recorded music, most of which are to do with pitch and key. This is because of the recording and playback technology available at the time of recording. *Hamba Nontsokolo* was most likely recorded on an LP, upon which rotation speed was far more controlled compared to the earlier 78 rpm (revolutions per minute) discs. Rotation speed matters because playing a record at an incorrect rpm affects its pitch. On earlier technologies, the rpm at which the song was recorded could vary even though the accepted standard at this time was 78 rpm. This standardisation improved with the advent of the LP, but these still depend upon both the speed of the original tape recording and the speed of replay. As Roger Beardsley argues, "Early tape transports such as the EMI BTR 1 and 2 and the Ampex 200 and 300 series were essentially mechanical devices

without any of today's computer speed controls. Even in the 1960s mistakes were made."[3]

This information is crucial as it casts some doubt on whether what we hear on the record was indeed the originally intended key. As Jed Rasula highlights, "recordings are vexatious for historians precisely because they are a medium of inscription; the act of writing a history must covertly contend with a history already in the process of transcribing itself, rendering the historian's account a surrogate act masquerading as authority."[4] Accounts of the original context of this particular recording are hard to come by and, as such, we don't know in what circumstances the recording was digitised when it was reprinted in the early 1990s. For the purpose of this analysis, I use the key of F# as heard on the 1993 Gallo Records re-release of the 1953 recording.

Hamba Nontsokolo is structured in the AABA form typical of many a jazz standard. As Allen highlights, the generic structure of jive songs typically consisted of a short harmonic cycle (in most cases chords I, IV, and V were repeated).[5] She states that over this progression, short repeated melodic phrases would become the standard in later years.[6] In the case of *Hamba Nontsokolo*'s melody, the repetition in the A section is rhythmic, and the pitches of the melody vary with each new melodic line.

The song is quite simply arranged, consisting of a single guitar as accompaniment along with two male backup singers (the Crooners) while Masuka sings lead vocal. The Crooners provide a two-part harmony backup and, in the B-section, the Crooners serve as part of a call-and-response.

The first thing that one hears when trying to analyse the song is that the accompanying guitar is slightly off-tune. This could be due to a variety of factors and important to note in an analysis. That said, we are still somewhat able to hear the intended chord(s) in the recording.
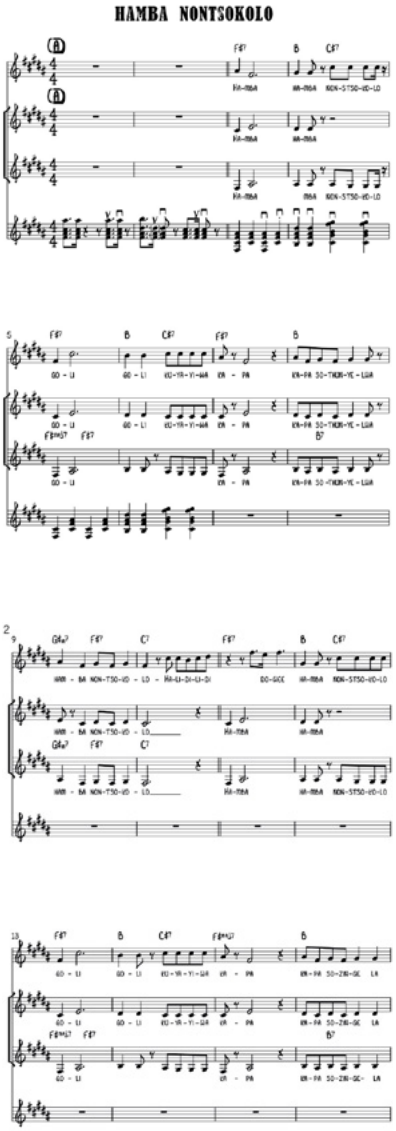


Figure 1. Scoresheet for *Hamba Nontsokolo* 1991. Composed and sung by Dorothy Masuka, *Hamba Nontsokolo and Other Original Hits from the 50s*. Gallo Music Productions CDZAC 60.

The harmony structure of the song is a short I IV V repeated cycle. In the A section, chord I is played for a full bar and chords IV and V take up half a bar each. The accompaniment consists primarily of closed-voiced triads, dominant 7th, and chords. The B section begins with a prolonged chord IV, slowing the harmonic rhythm considerably. The Crooners part consists mainly of chord tones and, in the instances when Masuka and the Crooners sing together, the choice of notes usually provides an outline of the chord using scale degrees 1, 3, and 7. The simplicity of the ensemble configuration serves to make Masuka an integral part of the ensemble as she is not only the lead singer but, in many instances, the third harmony reminding the listener of the all-male close-harmony singers of the 1940s.[7] This distinction is important because placing singers back in the ensemble in this way renders them integral to the performance rather than simply a featured extra. This should be coupled with the fact that Masuka was known for composing (at least, in part) her own material, thereby taking further ownership of her music. *Hamba Nontsokolo* is demonstrative of Masuka's aesthetic, which was heavily influenced by American swing and the blues. This is illustrated by both the guitar and the vocal parts. In the way of traditional swing, the guitar emphasises beats 2 and 4 with the use of accents produced by palm muting.

Figure 2 shows a duration graph for *Hamba Nontsokolo*, based on the measurements of the distance from one beat to another. The higher points mean a longer duration and each point measures the time difference from the previous point. If you look at the graph, you will see that there tends to be more time taken when playing beats 2 and 4; this pattern becomes more consistent as the song progresses. While the time differences are very small, this pattern points to another way to illustrate the swing feel. In a piece of music that adheres more strictly to metre, the graph is usually much straighter although there are, of course, differences in durations between beats. Without going into too much detail about individual time differences between beats, what you see in the duration graph is a zig-zag pattern—a testament to the push and pull feel of swing. Although the exact durations differ, the important thing is that the establishment of such a pattern creates the swing feel in the song. The voices follow the same method of emphasising the offbeat in order to achieve the swing feel, although this may not occur solely on beats 2 and 4. This is better illustrated by a spectrogram.

On the spectrogram, we can see the exact onset of the notes relative to the beats marked by vertical lines. Beyond only tempo, the spectrogram also shows us dynamics as well as pitching, using frequency markers. By following the spectrogram as the song plays, one can more closely study Masuka's vocal delivery choices. Her voice is easily distinguishable because it is the brightest orange colour, indicating that it's the loudest. On the shorter lines, we can see there is a clear dip at both ends of the notes, indicating a slide up to the desired pitch and a drop at the end. Sliding on and off notes is consistent with the traditional intonational traits of blues singers and those slides are further exacerbated by the use of a wide vibrato. The Crooners keep with the stylistic note dips but collectively use much less vibrato than Masuka.

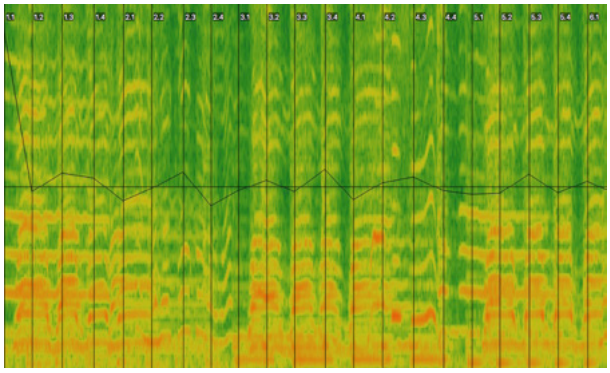


Figure 2. Annotated spectrogram and duration graph of the B Section of *Hamba Nontsokolo*.

As Nicholas Cook and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson explain,

> Acoustically, vowels and consonants are patterns of relative loudness among the sounding frequencies across the spectrum. Vowels are made by changing the shape of one's vocal cavity, and the effect of that is to change the balance of harmonics in the sound. That balance will remain the same whatever the pitches one may be singing. When singers want to change the colour of their voice, they shift the vowels up and forward (brighter) or down and back (darker) in the mouth, and the spectrum changes as a result.[8]

In the B section, the Crooners sing the word "waah" repeatedly, which offers us a clear example to see this tone analysis at work. The balance of the Crooners' harmonics shifts especially towards the end of the B section, as the tone of their part gets considerably "darker." If we look at Masuka's voice (again distinguishable because of the bright orange colour), we can see that the balance of the harmonics hardly changes. Rather, it holds steady in the upper partials, indicating a consistently bright tone on the part of Masuka. It may be interesting to note that many of the vocal jive songs of the era dealt with quite heavy topics in this way, by combining lyrics that told of the brutal realities endured by black South Africans with the jovial musical characteristics of jive.

This data illustrates some of the stylistic choices that went into creating what became recognised as vocal jive. The data itself is not mere cold data. What I've shown today has been carefully curated, which is a necessary precursor to re-arrangement because re-arrangement involves the selection of parts of the original to extract and weave into something new. That is to say, a new way of hearing the music as opposed to a re-orchestration, which just reorganises the existing music. Careful stylistic choices such as these begin to take centre stage in the absence of traditionally prized jazz performance practices, such as extensive improvisations and more complex harmonic structures. This is in stark contrast to how vocal jazz has been discussed and dismissed, usually by South African jazz historians invested in the instrumental tradition of the music. It is important to note that Masuka's vocal choices were made carefully, so that she could bridge the gap between sounding distinctive and remaining an integral part of the overall texture. These choices are bound in the basic principles of improvisation used by jazz musicians. In the supposed "absence" of these, we are left with the building blocks for an interpretation of jazz that, while clearly paying homage to traditional swing and blues, is uniquely our own.

By analysing *Hamba Nontsokolo* in this manner, with the recognition of Masuka as a pioneer in this genre, we start to see mechanics of this style and, perhaps, this may serve as a springboard for understanding how this music weaves, along with its instrumental counterparts such as *kwela*, into the greater tapestry of South African jazz. Recognising the musical characteristics of this composition serves to highlight Masuka's musical skill (which would only improve as she continued to write additional material) as well as to remind us of the importance of this song and other vocal music and singers to the overall development of South African jazz. By analysing work in this way, I have attempted to shift the focus away from the life and celebrity of Masuka and to the music that she helped to shape. I must concede, however, that the role music like this played in society and the anti-apartheid struggle is as critical as the music itself and is part of the reason why it has stood the test of time. Historically informed music analysis serves to extend the lives of *Hamba Nontsokolo* and other 50s classics, where their longevity is relatively autonomous to the original context. Indeed, considered in these ways, paying attention to the aesthetic shows how these classics may well speak back to their contexts and question our separation of South African jazz from black popular music.

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Notes

1 Allen, 'Seeking the Significance of Two "Classic" South African Jazz Standards'; Allen, 'Commerce, Politics, and Musical Hybridity'.

2 Bozzoli, 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies'.

3 Beardsley, 'Speeds and Pitching of 78rpm Gramophone Records'.

4 Rasula, 'The Media of Memory', 135.

5 Allen, 'Seeking the Significance of Two "Classic" South African Jazz Standards'.

6 Allen, 'Seeking the Significance of Two "Classic" South African Jazz Standards'.

7 Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*.

8 Cook and Leech-Wilkinson, 'A Musicologist's Guide to Sonic Visualiser'.

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