



Graceland controversy: Nakeeba, Phiri, Simon, Nasekela

Playing Tunes For Apartheid?

The confusion surrounding objections from anti-apartheid activists to singer Paul Simon and his work with South African musicians seems to have left the campaign for a cultural boycott in some disarray. Simon claimed at a press conference in London that the ANC had 'totally reversed' its position on their opposition to his *Graceland* album and tour. MD Naidoo, an ANC spokesman at its London office, said that the ANC's objection to Simon was based on a decision by the UN special committee on apartheid to place the musician on the UN blacklist. As Simon had written to the committee and reiterated his refusal to perform in South Africa 'in the context of the cultural boycott', Naidoo felt that this would be recognised by the ANC because he would be taken off the list.

It was originally proposed that Simon's name be put on the list because he had recorded part of his album in South Africa. Malcolm McLaren, the eccentric British musical entrepreneur who created the Sex Pistols, was put on the list for the same reason. Simon made it clear that he did not consider recording to constitute performance, and so his letter to

the UN was not for the purpose of apology but for clarification. Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, the exiled South African musicians who are playing on the *Graceland* tour and appeared on the platform with Simon, also drew attention to the lack of clarity surrounding the terms of the boycott. Their comments were also distinguished by disparaging remarks about 'fashionable' anti-apartheid activists; an attitude which their long-standing public opposition to apartheid makes particularly unfortunate.

Naidoo defined the ANC position as one of opposition to cultural relations with the apartheid regime except where the cultural work in question both exposed the nature of apartheid and helped to destroy it. Simon's view is: 'I assume the people understand what's happening in South Africa, and that apartheid is an odious system. I don't consider it to be my responsibility to educate people that have never heard about it.' The ANC's apparent readiness to take its cue from the UN over Paul Simon only related to the existing list. In general they would expect guidance from the mass democratic organisations within South Africa as

to whether an artist or their work should be boycotted. An article in the progressive *Rand Weekly Mail* recently observed that, 'Many South African musicians and actors remain completely mystified at the energy which British artists and activists spend on seemingly endless debate. But with most cultural organisations in South Africa still young, we remain without a nationally-formulated position on the boycott'.

The difficulty of resolving questions surrounding specific cultural works is one of the factors that has led to strong support within British solidarity organisations like Artists Against Apartheid and the Anti-Apartheid Movement for an absolute ban on cultural exchange. The *Graceland* wrangle comes in the wake of controversy over the production in London of two plays by the Market Theatre of Johannesburg with black and white actors. Protests that these plays breached the boycott, despite their clear criticism of apartheid, led to considerable discomfort in the solidarity movement, with activists torn between their absolutist reflexes and the patent absurdity of a picket.

The solidarity organisations owe their allegiance to the ANC. Given that the stated ANC position clearly allows for certain forms of cultural exchange as part of the struggle against apartheid, the strength of absolutist feeling is somewhat difficult to explain. The idea of 'total isolation' obviously has a symbolic appeal. But it would be regrettable if policies founded on a sense of loyalty and resolution were to ossify into a dogma which replaced a dynamic approach to debate and action.

The recent focus of attention upon the most contradictory aspects of the cultural boycott stands in some contrast to the growing tally of manoeuvres carried out by commercial concerns, acting partly in response to protesters' pressure, to distance themselves from apartheid. It also contrasts sadly with

the degree of authority commanded, largely as a result of the Gleneagles agreement, by campaigners against sporting links with South Africa.

While anti-apartheid activists are seen to be attacking artists who also profess opposition to apartheid, other performers are able to feel that the issue does not concern them. While few pop musicians would now play concerts in South Africa, what campaigning there has been to persuade them not to permit their records to be sold there, has had little effect. White South Africans identify strongly with Anglo-American popular culture; movies, rock music, television programmes. Depriving



Market Theatre's Bopha!

them of these would deny them the comforting sensation that the producers of the culture with which they identify do not object too strongly to apartheid, and deprive them of cultural luxuries that help insulate them from the cruelty over which they preside.

The success of *Graceland* has encouraged transnational record companies to trawl South Africa for more of its musical talent. Increasing Anglo-American interest in the commercial potential of South African culture makes clarified and renewed campaigning on the cultural boycott all the more urgent. •

Marek Kohn