

## Twenty-Seven Years



### 1

'It is not in one lifetime that you become a musician,' said pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview a few years before his death. Born in 1973, Molelekwa was a child prodigy from Tembisa, outside Johannesburg, and by the 1990s many regarded him as the great hope for South African jazz. Among musicians, the sense of veneration surrounding Molelekwa – Moses, Mos, Taiwa – is intense. But there is not much written about the man or his work.

### 2

Search for 'Moses' in South Africa and you will be given the following suggestions:

Moses Mabhida  
Moses Kotane  
Moses Sithole  
Moses Molelekwa

Respectively: two secretaries general of the South African Communist Party, one with a stadium named after him. A serial killer currently serving 2410 years for the 'ABC murders' of at least 38 and possibly over 70 people in 1994-1995 – so called because they happened outside Johannesburg in the townships of Atteridgeville, Boksburg and Cleveland. And then in fourth place: a jazz prodigy, pianist and composer who died in 2001 at the age of 27.

### 3

'It is not in one lifetime that you become a musician,' says the pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview that was recorded in the late 1990s.

Moses was born in 1973, part of what he called 'the lost generation': those who came of age as youth resistance to apartheid gathered to a crescendo in the 1980s. His grandfather was a pianist; so was his father Jerry 'Monk' Molelekwa, named that way because of his devotion to the work of Thelonious Monk. Jerry wanted his son to play the instrument too, not necessarily as a career but 'just to have that sound in the house', to play classical music perhaps, which was the great love of Moses' mother. With Bantu Education rejected and disrupted following the Soweto uprising of 1976, Jerry took Moses to the Federated Union

of Black Artists (FUBA) academy in downtown Johannesburg, where the young boy saw somebody in a practice room and was entranced. 'There is no question,' said Taiwa, 'that music saved my life.'

Jerry bought Moses an acoustic guitar but it was soon broken in a family squabble, and the upright pianos advertised in the classifieds always seemed to be gone by the time he rang. So he found a Casio keyboard to keep his son going, but it struggled to accommodate all the scales that the young prodigy wanted to play. Like Monk, Moses was someone who lived in his music, who could get lost in his own neighbourhood, who could be shambolic or withdrawn. He would always be nodding his head when he spoke to you, but whether in agreement or because he was marking an internal tempo, it was hard to say.

When Moses had made a name for himself, touring the US and playing with Miriam Makeba, Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela, the son of Thelonious Monk came to visit the Molelekwa family in Tembisa with offers of a musical scholarship to Berklee College of Music in Boston. The twenty-year-old opted instead to stay in South Africa and record his first album, *Finding One's Self*, which won both Best Traditional Jazz and Best Contemporary Jazz at the South African Music Awards in 1994. When he first heard tracks like 'Nobohle', 'Ntate Moholo' and 'Bo Molelekwa', says Jerry, he felt that 'they were non-starters': 'I could not understand them' – 'I would not have put them on, but at the same time, I found it difficult to correct him because all the things he said were right.' Moses Molelekwa was not,

after all, a jazz musician, says Pops Mohamed in the same YouTube tribute: he was an African piano player.

4

He played each note as though astonished by the previous one, as though every touch of his fingers on the keyboard was correcting an error and this touch in turn became an error to be corrected and so the tune never quite ended up the way it was meant to.

These lines are from *But Beautiful*, Geoff Dyer's 1991 series of improvisations on the lives of great mid-twentieth century American jazzmen and women: Charles Mingus, Billie Holiday, Lester Young and (in this case) Thelonious Monk. It goes on:

But a logic was operating, a logic unique to Monk: if you always played the least expected note a form would emerge, a negative imprint of what was initially anticipated.

I thought of using this as an epigraph to a piece on the life and music of Moses Taiwa Molelekwa. As a short quotation hovering before the opening of a written work, the epigraph can be compared to a key signature at the beginning of a musical score. I also thought of these lines by John Berger:

The moment at which a piece of music begins provides a clue as to the nature of all art . . . the incongruity of

that moment, compared to the uncounted, unperceived silence which preceded it.

But, then, having a single epigraph seemed to risk over-riding precisely this moment. Since the idea here is to see what it means to start from nothing, from the whiteness of the empty page, again and again. Anyway, I may as well mention now that my other choice was from James Baldwin, and in a different key:

It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

5

This is middle C, my piano teacher would explain when I was about three or four years old. And this is the family of C (playing the pentatonic scale), and they all get on together, that's why they are a family. And because it is C *major* they are a happy family.

Major being happy, minor being sad. It's one of the first things I learned in music lessons (and sometimes I think that these lessons are my first memory). But what does that mean exactly? Is it true? Physiologically true, or just a learned response? And what happens if you express the 'happy' via the 'sad', or 'sad' via the 'happy'?

These may well be naive questions, unacceptable to musos and musicologists. But one thing I have taken from the work of the late pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa is the need to risk being naive, and to begin at the beginning.

## 6

Three billion years before the present. A cooling earth, with vast rock masses called cratons the first chunks to solidify, like bits of bone in a thick geological stew. The friction between these proto-continental lumps and the upwelling mantle below forms substances that will one day be called 'diamonds', 'gold' and 'platinum' at immense depths and pressures. Volcanic intrusions punch these closer to the surface; superheated water dissolves metal in radical ways and threads it through solid rock in shiny seams.

What will become the African continent sits at the centre of it all, preserving its structural integrity more than any other ancient landmass. The presence of rare minerals and metals is determined by the age and size of the cratons, and the Kaapvaal craton is the oldest and biggest of them all. Within it forms the Bushveld Igneous Complex, the richest mineral treasure house on earth. The scene is almost set, but now a finishing touch. Two billion years ago, a meteorite twice the size of Table Mountain slams into the earth near what will one day be called Vredefort – possibly the biggest asteroid ever to strike the planet. The multiple-ringed crater is over 300 kilometres wide. The colossal shockwave of it bends and scrunches certain gold-bearing strata of the Witwatersrand Basin closer to the surface of the earth. Geological history reaches up to touch human history.

At the end of the nineteenth century, more and more distant descendants of the 100 or so humans who left Africa circa 100 000 years BP suddenly become interested in the incredible richness of mineral deposits in the Cape Colony

and Transvaal. The reefs of the Witwatersrand require a rescripting of imperial ambitions: trumped-up wars; rail networks from the interior to the ports; a political entity under centralised control; a country where there was none before – South Africa. A mining camp forms, then a mining city – Johannesburg. The first workings are close to the surface, but then the reef tilts downward. The ore quickly becomes diffuse, more difficult and expensive to mine.

Small-time prospectors are forced out. The mining houses of the Witwatersrand require major capitalisation. So the rocks below determine a specific pattern of social organisation above: a vast system of forced migrant labour from all through sub-Saharan Africa. Men from the Transkei and Zululand, from Lesotho and Swaziland, from Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Botswana encounter each other in rail carriages and guarded compounds, in shaft cages and underground stopes.

Languages begin to seep into each other, and the mining bosses try to codify a pidgin called Fanakalo: a simplified, infantilising tongue of imperative verbs: the name means ‘do it like this’. But at the same time, in the dormitory suburbs and slumyards of the Rand, another, unofficial lingua franca is evolving: one without words. It is being hammered out on the piano, evolving its own grammar. If it’s in C, it goes: C F C G, C F C G, C F C G. The same chords as the blues, but in a different order, changing everything. *Marabi*: a propulsive three-chord vamp that can sustain and welcome whatever melody is threaded over it, as played by legendary but unrecorded pianists like Ntebejana, Boet

Gashe, Toto, Highbricks (aka Nine Fingers) – and also by the grandfather of a young jazz prodigy from Tembisa named Moses Taiwa Molelekwa.

## 7

When I was eighteen and finishing school abroad, my father went (I think) a little crazy. He began giving away all our things. Maybe this is understandable behaviour when you are retrenched from a company you never liked anyway and then move to the opposite side of the country. But still, the scale of the purge stunned me.

Mostly I think of the record collection. My dad was at Leeds University during the 1960s, and often let it slip that Clapton, Hendrix and The Who had played in the student union, that it was no big deal back then. He had all their albums, with that luxuriant amount of space the LP format affords for artwork. Roger Daltrey in a tub full of Heinz baked beans (*The Who Sell Out*) and Carole King just kicking back at home with her cat (*Tapestry*). Robert Johnson, painted in watercolour from above (*King of the Delta Blues Singers*), his fingers picked out in the shadow. The original of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* itself, complete with cardboard-insert epaulettes and moustaches that you could anchor in your nose via little tags.

And when the needle came down, the low-end kick of these records on an analogue stereo: Eddie Cochran's 'Summertime Blues', Simon and Garfunkel's 'Cecilia'. It sent me into paroxysms of excitement. In the other partition of the shelving: opera. Box sets that I wasn't allowed to touch, and



then was (when older), but only after an elaborate ritual of cleaning the vinyl with a duster that picked up the motes via static as the record passed under it. Thick, hard-backed sets of Verdi, Puccini and Mozart that my father would play at top volume on New Year's Eve, wheeling the stereo outside to compete with the treffers issuing from across the road.

All of them he gave away, dumped at a charity shop one morning in downtown Johannesburg. What diaspora have they formed, I often wonder, spread out through the greater city, the country, the world? Who has the *Electric Ladyland* that I spent so much time poring over? Naked, languorous women spread across Hendrix's gatefold cover in a spectrum from Scandinavian to Nubian. For a small boy in a small town in mid-1980s South Africa at the height of the cultural boycott, this was a formative document. And also a paradox: it was precisely my father's commitment to a certain kind of Englishness that allowed me to hear, to start hearing, black music – filtered through the whole series of transatlantic exchanges that made up the Sixties.

## 8

'Does life begin at 40?' asks a tribute to a South African pianist and composer from Tembisa who died in 2001 at the age of 27: 'That's the time signature Moses Taiwa Molelekwa would have reached on Wednesday, 17 April 2013.' The online homage by *Chimurenga* magazine carries two tributes to Taiwa. The first is by the scholar and journalist Gwen Ansell:

Moses Molelekwa was remarkable for both his talent and the young age at which he began to show it. He had a very specific vision of the South African sound, and while it was informed by his predecessors (including Abdullah Ibrahim) it was very much his own. Unlike the Capetonians (Ibrahim, Mbambisa, etc.), it was much more infused with the hybrid, big-city vibe of the Johannesburg townships: with 80s pop, the Afrojazz of Masekela, and the avant-garde experiments of the Pelican and Odin cinema modern jazz crews and the jazz stokvels his father exposed him to. But alongside those, there were strong echoes of more rural musics – both the church hymnody of his grandparents' generation, and the complex rhythmic patterns and interlockings of sePedi pipe music.

The second tribute is by DJ and producer Rangoato Hlasane, who enlarges on the 'rural musics' that are present even within the slick production of an album like *Genes and Spirits*: 'I think Moses's hand writes in a deeply traditional manner, that is, he translates our idioms, euphemisms and angst into honest enchants, melancholies and aspirations.' He recalls an SABC1 programme in the late 1990s that would use the title track of that album as a signature tune:

I wouldn't miss 9–10pm TV time for a fix of this song. It reached me in a village where access to some good music was rare – TV and Radio were the only option. The song had all the elements of traditional music as I experienced from the village, as well as a voice I

have never experienced from the music I was hearing at that time and place. I knew that music has the power to heal through that song.

There are two different ways of writing about and responding to music here. One is the voice of the expert, sketching out South African jazz genealogies, name-checking influences, using a musical terminology that ranges from the technical to the vernacular, from 'hymnody' to *stokvels*. The other is speculative and personal; it speaks of 'our idioms', and evokes a specific encounter with Taiwa's music, beamed into a rural village via the new SABC channel with its tagline endlessly trying to forge a new national identity: 'Simunye: We are One.' It confesses its ignorance, the scarcity of what was available, how the music seemed to be both new and familiar at the same time. But his tribute is biased, says Hlasane, 'because I honestly have not listened intensely to the work of other pianists'.

There is a temptation for the writer approaching music to demonstrate encyclopedic knowledge: to flaunt information as a means of compensating for the difficulty of notating in words what certain sounds do to us. But the challenge, the challenge for all writing about anything that moves us, is also to carry within the writing a memory of that initial ignorance, of the silence before the music started.

## 9

The pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa was 27 years old when he died, in circumstances so grim that

barely anybody mentions them. By 27, he had absorbed and then reshaped a vast range of southern African and international musical idioms. By 27, I was only just beginning to understand these things: what music meant to and in the country of my birth. I was studying South African literature even while realising that the country's story was really, was mostly, encoded in sound, in song.

By way of autobiographical background, I will just note that: 1) My father was British and only came out to South Africa in the 1970s to work as a metallurgist; and so 2) I grew up on mining towns, first in the semi-desert of Namaqualand and then the West Wits Line outside Johannesburg, where eight of the ten deepest shafts in the world are concentrated, where the white electorate voted CP because the NP was too liberal, and the AWB sprayed the letters FW on every stop sign; and 3) I wanted to get out of there.

Not necessarily because my young brain had puzzled out all the moral implications, but because at some level I must have sensed that I was living in a dying system, a historical dead end. In an essay titled 'What is a Classic?', JM Coetzee remembers being a young boy in a small South African town and hearing the sound of Bach coming from a neighbour's garden – *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, even though he does not know that yet. His young self is transfixed; his older self wonders exactly what was happening in this moment. Is it high art acting on him, the mesmeric effect of 'the classic' on a young mind? Or is he, at some subconscious level, selecting the codes of a different culture, a culture that will (he hopes) take him out of a cul-de-sac?

These are questions that may be impossible to answer about oneself. But that does not mean (he goes on) that they shouldn't be asked, and asked in the clearest way possible.

10

'I want to play the piano just like the mbira is played,' says the late jazz prodigy and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview recorded during the late 1990s. Part of Shona culture for thousands of years along the Zambezi River, the mbira can be classed as a lammellophone or a linguaphone (from the Latin *lingua* = 'tongue') because of the flattened iron tines that are played with each thumb, in complex 3/2 cross-rhythms. The placement of the metal tongues means that intricate harmonic and rhythmic effects can be achieved through fairly small movements.

But while pianos standardise all scales into the equal temperament of major and minor, the mbira holds other tunings in its wood and buzz and metal. Molelekwa uses the mbira in several of his recordings, but you can hear its musical language more generally in his compositions. The way they build up complex musical textures from repeated short forms that interlock and cross-cut, both contradicting and setting each other off again. In the title track of *Genes and Spirits*, for example, where different time signatures seem to be happening simultaneously, so that the music seems to be perpetually (the only word I can think of for this) spilling over itself.

The other day I met someone (around my age, also white) who grew up in a place called Secunda, built around coal in the same way that my hometown, Carletonville, was built around gold. Both were company towns, both key industrial sites for the apartheid state and its attempt at economic autarky.

Our memories of attending government schools during the 1980s intersected in very specific detail. We both had to practise safety drills in case of terrorist attack, and in both our institutions there was a coded double-speak that would crackle over the intercom: *Seuns en dogters gaan buitentoe!* meant what it said (Go outside, boys and girls); but *Ontruim asseblief julle klaskamers* (Please evacuate your classrooms) really meant: 'Ignore that instruction and crawl under your desks.' In both our schools there were the usual posters of the water cycle, dinosaurs, the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, but also images of landmines and limpet mines as used by communist terrorists on the border – a sort of 'Know Your Landmine' infographic. She even remembered that, in Secunda, one of the duties of the class monitors was to sweep the playground for such explosive devices each morning.

At about ten years old I started running from there, and have never really stopped. The first escape was to move from the government school (which was segregated, with no music that I remember) to a private school in Johannesburg: a chapel with hymns whose tunes I had to learn; the immense luxury of practice rooms with pianos in them,

just waiting there silently in the long afternoons. So now, as Nelson Mandela walks free from 27 years in prison, I am being driven to the city each Sunday afternoon, past concrete headgears with old South African flags flying from them, along industrial pipelines painted in camouflage, along the outskirts of turbulent, ungovernable Soweto.

Past, in other words, one of the great musical engines of the continent, or even the world. But as the company car moves along the highway and sound comes out of its dashboard, there is a strange cultural relay happening, in that you are only hearing the musics that came from this place – the South Western Townships, the indestructible beats of Soweto – when they are relayed back to you by Pete Seeger or Paul Simon's *Graceland*. You have to hear it via this complex transnational circuit – relayed back to you in a changed, often anodyne form – before you can *hear* it. By the time you have listened your way through the canon of South African jazz, Moses is dead. You're late, always late.

## 12

'I want to play the piano just like the mbira is played,' says the late jazz prodigy and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa. The kind of translation that he describes here is just one part of the immensely complex series of marriages between different musical idioms, technologies and sensibilities that happened in this part of the world, and at a breakneck pace, following the mineral revolution of the late 19th century.

Short forms picked out for thousands of years on the

mbira make the jump to pianos carted out by Moravian missionaries. Or Lutherans, Methodists or Anglicans with their four-part hymnals, tonic sol-fas and soon-to-be-broken rules about parallel fifths. Phrases traded and code-switched between different instruments, tonalities and bodies. In other parts of town, the rock-solid stomps of Zulu *ingoma* and *indlamu* bed down in left-hand piano ostinatos. Ostinatos that you can still hear when Dollar Brand hits that upright so hard in Cape Town, when he was still hanging around the docks listening to American sailors' records, when he was still called Dollar, before he got all solemn and ambassadorial.

Call and response patterns colonise squeezeboxes, electric organs, then guitars. Folk melodies, ditties, manly bragging, warnings about the perils of the city – they morph into fingerings, handshapes that move up and down the fretboard of the one *isiginci* for sale in the concession store. The pianoforte is absorbing more and more; all manner of things are being worked out here, hammered out on this musical anvil: ceremonial Xhosa songs and African Christian hymns; swing tunes and spirituals; *vastrap* and *ghommali-djies* from the Cape.

It's a no longer a polite piano, it's a forte – this is the *marabi* era. Pianists are required to function at industrial tempos, all night long: 'nice time' parties to beckon the punters and release the pressure of Johannesburg's double-time industrial revolution. Native yards, compounds, *skokiaan* – even Louis Armstrong (unwittingly) sings about it: 'Happy happy Africa!' And the petit bourgeois are just as horrified



by *marabi* in iRhawwtini as they were by 'jass' in New Orleans. 'Real refuse dump affairs,' wrote Herbert Dhlomo for *Ilanga lase Natal* (The Natal Sun) in 1953, 'attended by degenerate young elements, the uninitiated newly-arrived country bumpkins and the morbidly curious.' But then he changes his tune, and you can almost hear the new musical language being hammered out below the surface of his oh-so-proper prose:

And yet what naturally talented players the ragtime and *nduduma* concerts had! Vampers (as they were called) who improvised many 'hot' original dance and singing numbers at the spur of the moment, and who play or accompany any piece after hearing the melody once, and did so in any key; fellows who played music not because it was fashionable, but because they were born musicians – helpless victims of a Muse that gave them fire which consumed them as they could not control it, nor knew nor cared what it was; men who, like tribal bards of old, created beauty they knew not and flung it back unrecorded to the elements which gave it birth.

*Nduduma* – the Zulu word for it, named for the mine dumps between which it happened, those yellow-ridged hills of digested rock that were (as Nadine Gordimer wrote about the mines of her childhood) 'thrown up and patted down with the unlovely precision that marked them manufactured unmistakably as a sand castle'. *Marabi*: 'an African music

translated to Western instruments', in the words of trombonist Jonas Gwangwa. Sax player Winston 'King Force' Silgee describes the scene:

*Marabi*: that was the environment! It was either organ but mostly piano. You get there, you pay your ten cents. You get your scale of whatever concoction there is, then you dance. It used to start from Friday night right through Sunday evening. You get tired, you go home, go and sleep, come back again, each time you get in. The piano with the audience making a lot of noise. Trying to make some theme out of what is playing.

A musical culture associated with illegality, bootleg liquor and police raids, an anathema to the black Christian middle class, but still an unignorable part of the urban soundscape, its riffs and accents always intruding on the repertoire of the more polite concert and dance bands. Silgee grew up in a 'respectable' home but remembered watching and listen to *marabi* 'at the window' – 'it got itself infiltrated in me'.

In other parts of town, on the other side of the window, still more musical translations and transmutations: Wilfred Sentso and his School of Modern Piano Syncopation, which also taught saxophone and 'trumpet blowing', 'crooning, tap dancing and ragging'. Vaudeville and *itimiti*, the Pitch Black Follies, the Merry Blackbirds, all kinds of mimicry and minstrelsy. Xhosa clicks trip into English patter songs; folk melodies go metallic on the penny whistles that Scottish regiments brought with them, fighting England's wars.

And so does American swing, concert and dance – everyone pushing the notes a bit, pulling away from industry-standard equal temperament, flattening tones a little, ‘putting salt in the tune’. Matchsticks get jammed in organs to hold down the right keys, to keep the *marabi* going. *Marabi*, from Marabastad near Pretoria maybe, or maybe from the SeSotho *ho raba raba*, ‘to fly around’. The etymology is not certain but the grammar is in no doubt. If it’s in C, it’s C F C G, C F C G, C F C G. It’s a three-chord loop, like the blues. But not like the blues. It’s not bluesy, it’s major, it’s gospel. It’s going on (all night); it’s leaving you in no doubt. It’s the harmonic DNA that makes South African jazz sound the way it does: warm, reverent, overflowing.

### 13

Imagine listening to someone in a rehearsal room, playing their scales or practising a sonata. A piano in a room all to oneself. It is classical training. They play until they make a mistake, until they hit a wrong note.

They stop and start again.

### 14

‘It is not in one lifetime that you become a musician,’ says the pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview that was recorded as he was putting the finishing touches to *Genes and Spirits*, the 1998 release that cemented his reputation as one of the main innovators in the South African music scene. He goes on to name three of his big-

gest influences: Herbie Hancock, for the way he treats the keyboard as a site of restless experimentation; Abdullah Ibrahim, for his simplicity; and the lesser-known Bheki Mseleku, for his merging of jazz techniques and southern African melodic lines. Here was a musician who had contact with earlier selves, since he could play so many instruments so well. 'He created his own, Bheki Mseleku-style of playing,' says Moses.

## 15

Twenty-odd years after South Africa's first democratic elections, many people have been asking about 'post-apartheid literature', having panel discussions, trying to work out what it might be. But can writing ever be punctual in this sense? Could it not be argued that the most important post-apartheid writing might have emerged in the 1980s, or that the definitive novel of apartheid might be still to come?

Perhaps asking what it means to be 'in time' – culturally, musically, historically – allows us to counterpoint the work of two South African artists who died far too young: pianist Moses Taiwa Molelekwa (1973–2001) and writer K Sello Duiker (1974–2005).

## 16

'We know about Moses, but what about you? What's your story?' A friend who read my draft on the late pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa suggested that I amplify the personal element that had been implicit or submerged within it, and sent me Njabulo Ndebele's essay

on Brenda Fassie: 'If this has been a personal, imaginative embrace of Brenda, I have also now made the personal, public.' Ndebele goes on to say that 'we do need to release more and more personal data into our public home', since it is only through this pouring out of personal feeling and thinking that a new public will become possible.

One way of understanding the personal essay is as a form that allows the writer to give not only her or his thoughts but also the narrative of how she or he came by them. More specialised and academic forms of writing need to appear more knowing from the outset: it is harder for them to admit the moment of encounter, of reading or seeing or listening to something for the first time. Also, the scholarly mode tends to imply that we discover things in the right order, in a linear fashion that implies a logic of steady intellectual growth and development, of one thing leading to another.

But I think we all put ourselves together in the most arbitrary, non-linear ways, that stocking our minds is mostly a process of random assembly, and that so many essential albums, artworks and books will be discovered embarrassingly late. This is amplified in a country where political systems were deliberately engineered to make certain sectors of the population ignorant or oblivious of others.

Yet having started this process here, of spurring autobiography via sound, I realise that it threatens to become unstoppable, to overflow. We can all pour out narratives related to music, which seem to carry so much personal history so avidly.

For high school, I ran still further away, to KwaZulu-Natal. To an institution devoted to rugby, physical humiliation and energetic singing of the school hymn. On the evenings prior to big matches we would all be herded down to the fields for war-cry practice: 500 private schoolboys stomping and shouting in a garbled approximation of Zulu. Then up to the Main Quad, where the First XV would cluster on the fountain and the rest of us would mass around them adoringly. At the climactic moment, the head boy's window would swing open and we would all fall into a reverential hush. Mark Knopfler's plaintive guitar floated out on the balmy Midlands air: 'Brothers in Arms'.

My escape at this place was the music school, a building set apart from the rest, downslope among trees. Here I learned how to play the sax, to score for strings, to use Cubase: I was going to be 'a composer'. The music teachers were also set apart, somehow, perhaps because they were Afrikaans in an English school, eccentric types who had no interest in sport and weren't in great physical shape.

There was George, who led our swing band all over the country until he had a mild heart attack during a Duke Ellington tribute. A triple bypass later and he was back in the office, fishing bitten mouthpieces and reeds from the glass of water and disinfectant that always stood there. He spent hours sitting with us, inducting his pupils into the mysteries of 'Dixie Jazz', 'Tuxedo Junction' and (our show-stopper) Joseph Zawinul's 'Birdland'. He leaned over scores with his goggle eyes and scatted until we got the syncopa-

tion right: 'Doo-DAH! Dee-DAH-doo-dee-DAH!' There was Gerard, who conducted the school choir and was so sensitive and endlessly encouraging that we would play tricks on him and submit compositions of just two or three notes: a C major triad, *molto adagio*, *sostenuto*. His hands would go up, his fringe would fall ecstatically over his eyes: 'It's so beautiful!'

Mainly, though, I am thinking of Federico, a thin keyboard virtuoso with a fiery orange beard. A chain-smoker and Buddhist who lived beyond the railway line and clearly disliked everything about the school's Protestant culture but was prepared to play during services because he so loved the chapel organ. During the services, he would have to trot out the clumpy hymns, the dreaded 'Stars of the Morning' in 3/4, which the rucker buggers would bellow out with tone-deaf enthusiasm. But, before and after, he would smuggle in his own choices, working all three levels of the organ like a matter of life and death, generally in a towering rage because the Headmaster always told him the music should be 'less weird'. Undeterred, he would go for even more dissonant and avant-garde numbers, gleefully showing me scores that were hard even to understand: solid black bands to signal that a forearm or fist should be laid down on the keys, improvisatory squiggles, dog-whistle harmonics and bass in the feet that made the stained-glass windows judder.

Arvo Pärt, Philip Glass, Gyorgy Ligeti, Olivier Messiaen, John Tavener – all these glimpses of another universe came through him, in the 'music appreciation' lessons I would

have, sitting in his office, listening to a tiny CD player, following the scores that he had ordered from overseas. We would discuss how different cadences could be described in words: the 'amen' cadence; the 'perfect cadence' ('like going home'); the rarer device of the Picardy third, when a piece that has been written in a minor mode ends on a major chord, the third note sharpening in the final moments. Common in the Renaissance, but there in pop music too, in Roberta Flack: killing me softly . . . with his *song*.

On Saturdays, as squads of prefects combed the dormitories to check that nobody was bunking off sports, I would sometimes slip into the gallery of the chapel, one place they would not think to check. Federico would be practising the organ, really pulling out all the stops. Toccatas and fugues by Widor and Bach, enormous cascading pieces that now make me think of what Abdullah Ibrahim said of Ellington's orchestra: that to listen to it was one thing, but to be playing right in the centre of it – that was like being in 'a vast starship of sound'.

I even composed an organ fugue for an end-of-year service, but on computer software, and without much sense of what was possible in terms of technique. When the time came, I was the page-turner, watching Federico try to make his way through all the show-off scales and awkward intervals. The Head had been complaining again: the maestro was furious, was sight-reading and making mistakes, inflicting all those dissonances on the school body. But there I was, pinned to the pages, watching him fight his way through my own composition.



Phaswane Mpe (1970–2004)

Moses Taiwa Molelekwa (1973–2001)

K Sello Duiker (1974–2005)

Three talented men, three great hopes for a post-apartheid South African culture, gone too soon. The first an academic and novelist, author of the strange and prophetic short work *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001). The second a pianist and composer, whose major works are *Finding One's Self* (1993) and *Genes and Spirits* (1998), with *Wa Mpona* (2002), *Darkness Pass* (2004) and several live albums released posthumously. The third, the author of two key novels of the South African transition – *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) – who was working as a screenwriter at SABC1 when he took his own life.

If Molelekwa carried the hopes of South African music in the 1990s, then for literature perhaps it was Duiker and Mpe. Yet each of these talented, troubled men would be dead before the end of South Africa's first decade as a democracy, leaving a great sense of sorrow and emptiness. For me they are bracketed together: discovered together (late). What they share (Taiwa and Sello especially): earnestness, naivety. A voice that was vulnerable, that was still in the process of working itself out. The occasional false notes that come with the ambition of trying to get somewhere else, somewhere new. Also: an unwillingness to talk about the circumstances of their deaths. Can one listen to the 1990s through their work, at a time when the

1990s seems very far away, when a period that you lived through has now become historical?

19

In an interview, pianist Moses Molelekwa named his three biggest influences as Abdullah Ibrahim, Herbie Hancock and Bheki Mseleku. Ibrahim for his hard-won simplicity; Herbie for the way he treats the keyboard as a site of restless experimentation; Mseleku for his merging of jazz techniques and southern African melodic lines.

In finding out more about Bheki Mseleku – who suffered from diabetes and bipolar affective disorder, who spent two years on retreat in a Buddhist temple and many more in exile – I learned that he had once met Alice Coltrane in Newport. Here she gave him the mouthpiece that John Coltrane had used during the recording of *A Love Supreme*. When Mseleku returned to South Africa in 1994, this was taken during a burglary in Johannesburg – an event which, according to his 2008 obituary, ‘seriously destabilised him’. The mouthpiece Coltrane used in the recording of ‘Prayer’ and ‘Ascent’, a mouthpiece which he bit into, and which would have carried his teeth marks – this went missing in Johannesburg, perhaps dumped in a skip or a storm drain, perhaps finding its way to an unwitting musician. For weeks I carried around this footnote, stunned, not really knowing what to do with it.

20

‘Does life begin at 40?’ asked an online tribute to a South African pianist and composer who died in 2001 at the age

80

of 27: 'That's the time signature Moses Taiwa Molelekwa would have reached on Wednesday, 17 April 2013.'

'Time signature' is a musical term for the number of beats in a bar. I want to stretch it to consider the musical signature of a time – 1994 to 2004, the first ten years of South African democracy – that is by now a historical period. Now when an album like Molelekwa's *Genes and Spirits* or a book like K Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, which once seemed so contemporary, have become period pieces. So what does it mean to *listen* to those years, in both Molelekwa's playing and the verbal signature of Duiker's prose?

For me these two artists have always been mixed up with each other, and with a series of visits back to a rapidly changing country during my twenties. I would return from the cold northern hemisphere to Cape Town, rent a room in Observatory and begin conducting my 'research'. Mostly this involved wandering alone around the city and visiting record shops, since music seemed to disclose, ahead of any other form, the shape of things to come: making audible what would gradually become visible.

*Quiet Violence* is a book with music threaded all the way through it: timeless sounds like Cesaria Evora and Peter Tosh, but also references to club anthems and compilations that date the work quite precisely, and even comically: seeing Café del Mar and Jamiroquai referred to as the acme of hipness makes me smile now. Near the beginning is a long passage in which the main narrator, Tshepo, describes Cape

Town nightlife, suggesting that designer clothes matter more than racialised histories:

[N]o one really cares that you're black and that your mother sent you to private school so that you could speak well. No one cares that you're white and that your father abuses his colleagues at work and calls them kaffirs at home. On the dance floor it doesn't matter what party you voted for in the last election or whether you know how many provinces make up the country. People only care that you can dance and that you look good. They care that you are wearing Soviet jeans with an expensive Gucci shirt and that you have a cute ass.

As the passage goes on, the young hedonists all begin to coalesce into some kind of new, consumerist, post-millennial South African on the dance floor: 'The people I know never forget that in essence the difference between kwaito and rave is down to a difference in beats per minute and that the margin is becoming narrower.' It's hard to tell the ratio of utopia to dystopia (or irony to sincerity) in this vision; it's difficult to know whether they are liberated or trapped in music – and the protagonist is, after all, in a mental institution for 'cannabis-induced psychosis'. But the idea that black, brown and white are going to melt into each other on the dance floor, are going to meet in the middle with regard to BPM – that version of the contemporary also seems very distant now.

But it's less the writing explicitly about music than the tone colour or timbre of the prose that I am thinking of. Duiker's works are harsh, unrelenting. His prose seemed to capture the beauty but also the menace of a city that I was just beginning to know. Even in the lyrical parts of a book like *Thirteen Cents*, there is the sense of something controlling and sinister just out of vision, just behind the pastoral façade: 'When I wake up I can only feel the sun on my face. The shadow has moved. It's the sun. It does that to everything. It moves things.'

As a form, the *bildungsroman* (or coming-of-age novel, of which *Quiet Violence* is a queer, postcolonial variant) generally lends itself to a lonely, alienated voice. Just as it is easier to reach for a dark and diminished minor chord on the piano when feeling angst-ridden – the hands fall naturally into that pattern. The result is that Sello keeps hitting the same notes: sounds and sentences that take themselves very seriously, short sentences that are arranged in a tight holding pattern for the weight of emotion and social trauma they are expressing.

Trying to express similar things in major keys, though – that is a different exercise.

## 21

In his autobiography, *Blame Me on History*, Bloke Modisane writes about Johannesburg's Sophiatown in the 1950s, the 'Fabulous Fifties'. The book sounds a discordant note in the mythology that has grown up around the era. He recalls moving in white liberal circles in which he was treated as a

curiosity: 'Most of them were visibly struggling with the word "African" which was almost always one beat too late.' He goes on to catch something not often put into words, something about how South African sorrow and entrapment sound out in major keys, and something that I keep coming back to in thinking about the life and death of the pianist Moses Taiwa Molelekwa:

[M]y life is like the penny whistle music spinning on eternally with the same repetitive persistency; it is deceptively happy, but all this is on the surface . . . beneath all this is the heavy storm-trooping rhythmic line, a jazzy knell tolling a structure of sadness into a pyramid of monotony; the sadness is a rhythm unchanging in its thematic structure, oppressive, dominating and regulating the tonality of the laughter and joy.

22

I should admit that many of the tracks on *Finding One's Self*, the debut album by Molelekwa, are just too smooth for me: too melodious, even a little kitsch. I find myself listening between and through those over-produced numbers to hear the parts when the cheesy guitars and synths cut out to leave just the fundamental trio: the deep grammar of piano, bass, percussion. Or just the solo pianist at work, as on the double album released after his death, *Darkness Pass*. On it we hear Moses thinking things through at the keyboard in real time, puzzling out specific solutions

84

to specific problems: 'Crouched over his piano working through something intricate,' writes Binyavanga Wainaina, 'caught in the most fragile of places, trying to juggle things at the furthest reaches of his ability.'

23

'I went through a couple of books to see how people describe musicians, you know,' says the pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview recorded in the late 1990s, 'how people describe music. And I haven't really found a satisfactory answer.'

In the liner notes to *Darkness Pass*, Jerry Molelekwa writes with beautiful formality about his son's music-making. The album, he says, is 'a vital and hitherto unheard documentation of Moses' thought processes and his daily, obsessive piano playing rituals'. He goes on to describe how it was recorded:

There were only three people in the SABC M1 studio during this process: the engineer who made sure the sound (captured on two Neumann microphones) was as unadulterated and serene as possible. Flo, who kept the doors locked (avoiding unexpected interruption from the outside) and Moses, totally engrossed in exploring the quietude, using the sound from the Steinway Grand and his own impeccable energies, skills and feelings.

It is a strong image of Moses' wife, Florence Mthoba, ensuring a safe and peaceful space, acting as a gatekeeper and guardian of his creativity, as the partners of intensely creative people often do. So how did it come to what it came to? The details of Moses' and Flo's deaths are seldom mentioned, and introducing them is likely to create a discord that will hang in the air for long after this or any other tribute has ended.

They were found in circumstances that (say most of the reports) have still not been adequately explained. Their office in downtown Johannesburg was in disarray. There was no sign of forced entry. There were banknotes scattered on the floor. She had been strangled to death. He was hanging from a beam.

## 24

Following the death of South African pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in 2001, there was an outpouring of musical tributes. Jimmy Dlodlu, Bokani Dyer, Mark Fransmann, Hotep Idris Galeta, Lwanda Gogwana, Sipho Gumede, Paul Hanmer, Moses Khumalo, Sibongile Khumalo, Themba Mkhize, Pops Mohamed, McCoy Mrubata, Kesivan Naidoo, Tu Nokwe, Buddy Wells. And not only from jazz musicians, but also from artists with whom he had collaborated across a wide range of genres during his short life: *maskanda* player Shaluza Max; kwaito groups Bongo Maffin and TKZee; house producers Brothers of Peace. The classical pianist Joanna MacGregor remembered their collaboration in London, experimenting with



John Cage's prepared piano techniques, making harmonics, using programmed drums to generate long, driving improvised pieces that sounded, she said, 'like Steve Reich had come out of a Johannesburg club': 'I used to enjoy watching him do t'ai chi before going onstage.'

The musical tributes are listed on a lovingly compiled online discography, along with the brief dedications in the liner notes. The enormous archive of video clips that have been uploaded form another kind of homage to Molelekwa. But in 2013, the year in which Moses would have turned 40, the Wikipedia entry for a man once regarded as the great hope of South African jazz was little more than a stub, ending on a rueful note: 'Although Molelekwa has great acclaim from critics and musicians alike, little is written about this brilliant pianist and composer.'

There are photographs of Moses, of course, often with his one shoulder higher than the other at the piano, giving a sense of him being at a slight angle to the world. His hands generally seem calm, as if they are at rest, even though they might be mid-phrase. But, mostly, there are YouTube clips: unvetted, unsorted, sometimes unfocused. Many people have written brilliantly about photographs of musicians. But YouTube fragments are much harder to be meditative about.

One thing to say is that the visuals are often blurred but the sound is generally clear. And so this digital archive reverses the situation with regard to the analogue remains of early American blues and jazz musicians. Robert Johnson's recordings are scratchy, but the King of the Delta

Blues looks out at us from photographs so clearly. Resting on the guitar's neck are those 'sharp, slender fingers' that, as Johnny Shines put it, 'fluttered like a trapped bird' when he played.

Enter the world memory of the internet in search of Moses Taiwa Molelekwa and you will find him playing in a Yin and Yang cap wearing headphones, or crouched over mixing desks. Hitting drums, hitting his chest, working out polyrhythms with his percussionists: scenes with no context, studios that could be anywhere. The blurry, hazy quality of the footage seems related in some way to the introverted concentration that many people speak of when remembering Moses, the daze of creative excitement that he seemed to exist in. He would always be nodding his head when he spoke to you, but whether in agreement or because he was marking an internal tempo, it was difficult to say.

## 25

The music library on my computer begins with Abdullah Ibrahim, and I've kept it that way, deleting Aaron Copland and others. More specifically, it begins with 'Blues for a Hip King', the solo piano version on the album *African Dawn*. I like it so because the hymn-like chord progressions in that piece have a total inevitability about them: it sounds like some kind of pianistic manifesto, and a history lesson too.

I first found the CD circa 1998 in the house of my girlfriend's mother, Rachael, in North London. She was scep-

tical of me at first, had made it very clear that she never bought Outspan oranges during the 1980s, once told me that 'white South Africa has a lot to answer for'. Of course I knew that in some indirect way; yet no one had ever said it to me outright. But over the years we became close. She told me that going alone to jazz clubs had helped her get through a messy divorce. She had lots of pianists in her collection: Oscar Peterson, Keith Jarrett, Art Tatum. She had several Abdullah Ibrahim CDs, and 'Blues for a Hip King' (which is not really blues) started me on a slow pilgrimage that has eventually led to this piece on Moses Taiwa Molelekwa, the musician who was once spoken of as the inheritor of Ibrahim's mantle, but who died in 2001 at the age of 27.

I listened my way through the canon of South African jazz in the cold north of Scotland. In the Edinburgh City Library there was a music basement, and someone there had once been chasing the same sound. The catalogue had real depth, and I would clatter through all the CDs, check some out, then walk round the Craggs listening to the lowing basslines of Johnny Dyani, feeling very homesick. Sometime around then I remember connecting to Wi-Fi for the first time, and thinking how miraculous it was that I could harvest music from thin air, just as the pot plants in my little tenement attic were taking in light and water.

My relationship ended but Rachael and I still kept in touch. Shortly before I left the UK for good, she sent me a listing for Keith Jarrett: Solo Piano at the Royal Festival Hall. I took a train down from Scotland immediately.

I arrived at the auditorium and she wasn't there; she was late. And I knew how much Keith hated latecomers, how the doors would be barred. Seconds before he went on stage she slipped into the seat next to me.

Jarrett played for about three, four hours, solo improvisation. For the first two thirds, it was dissonant, angular. He shouted at the audience for coughing, for taking pictures, and I loved him for it. 'I love you, Keith!' shouted someone from the balcony, as he was scolding us. 'Well, it's nice to be loved,' he replied, 'but it's not nice to be coughed at.' He kept stopping and starting, irritable, complaining about the acoustics. For a moment it seemed like the whole performance might fall apart. More dissonance: relentless, cascading scales of (as Sibelius wanted it) 'pure cold water'.

Then, slowly, his playing began to thaw. We heard the gospel chords pulsing underneath, coming slowly back, the warmth. We entered the major phase.

The playing began to do something that I have also heard sometimes in the warm, reverent work of Ibrahim and Molelekwa: to spill, as if there was excess of it, and all the ways of subdividing sound into different tracks, numbers, movements, suites, albums and any given arrangement were just arbitrary, were artificial holding patterns for one lifelong composition that was now – like the glass of Scotch and milk on the piano in Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues', 'like the very cup of trembling' – pouring out, now threatening to, now beginning to spill over itself, the keyboard and all of us there.

Enter the world memory of the internet in search of Moses Taiwa Molelekwa and you will find him playing in a Yin and Yang cap with headphones on, or crouched over mixing desks. Hitting drums, hitting his chest, working out polyrhythms with his percussionists: scenes with no context, studios that could be anywhere. The blurry, hazy quality of the footage seems related in some way to the introverted concentration that many people speak of when remembering Moses, the daze of creative excitement that he seemed to exist in. He would always be nodding his head when he spoke to you, but whether in agreement or because he was marking an internal tempo, it was difficult to say.

In one of the many clips that I have watched (making up for lost time), there is footage from an old SABC programme called *The Blues Room*. An old white jazz custodian introduces Moses, who politely hears out the rather patronising introduction, responds as best he can to questions about the making of *Genes and Spirits*, then sits down and works at the piano with his calm hands. He plays 'Bo Molelekwa', my favourite of his compositions. It has a wandering chord progression, but at the end of each stanza comes a dotted, slowly swinging refrain. As is often the case with truly gifted instrumentalists, the playing seems almost to be slowing down (even though it's not). The notes are late, just late, but they are also perfectly in time.

Finally, it sounds like something being underlined several times, something very calm, very confident – something that is sure it will be heard and understood.

27

'I went through a couple of books to see how people describe musicians, you know,' says the pianist and composer Moses Taiwa Molelekwa in an interview recorded in the late 1990s, 'how people describe music. And I haven't really found a satisfactory answer.'