

Swinging



For years they those Merry

BETWEEN 1930 and the mid 1950's the black music scene in South Africa was dominated by large and powerful swing bands.

Today jazz fans who remember the era will spend hours arguing about which was the best band at the time.

This is the story of one of the bands that have often been put into the top spot of the era — the Merry Blackbirds.

The period was one of immense social upheaval for the black people of this country. In the thirties reports of overcrowding, soil erosion and starvation in the rural areas — that blacks had been squashed into after the 1913 Land Act — were widespread. Thousands of people abandoned the countryside to eke out a living in the towns.

Not everyone experienced this upheaval in the same way. Some came as workers in the mines and factories of Jo'burg, others as clerks, teachers or professional men. Some were unable to find jobs. Class divisions in urban black society rapidly developed.

And this was expressed in the new cultural and musical patterns that emerged in black urban living areas. The Merry Blackbirds came to symbolize the values, aspirations, lifestyle and predicament of one group in this wide variety of classes that grew up in the city — the small but vocal black middle class.

The origins of the band reflect the class origins and values of the men and women who "made it". The band was born in 1932, in a tenement building in Rocky Street, Doornfontein called Rugby Terrace — which was only demolished recently. This was in one of the more fashionable areas of what was otherwise a big slum area in Jo'burg at that time.

Already class divisions had created different musical forms and places of entertainment. The work-

in the slums



The band used to turn out at performances "very smart — with kitty bows, nugget shines and gold cuff links".

were the brassiest black band in town. Then Blackbirds ran into a spot of trouble . . .

ing class and unemployed danced and drank to wild marabi music in the slumyard shacks of shebeen queens while teachers and omabalane (clerks) preferred the more sedate environment of places like the Bantu Mens Social Centre, the Springbok Hall of Vrededorp and the New Inchape Palace de Dance where according to one observer "the european type of dance was followed exclusively."

At these posh halls people were entertained by ragtime and vocal groups that adopted names like the Darktown Strutters, the Hever Hivers and the African Own Entertainers.

This environment was perfectly

The workers danced and drank to the wild stairs of Maali music

sued to the style and values of the people who came together to form the Merry Blackbirds. The idea to form the band came from a man called Griffiths Motsieloa — a black music promoter who had just returned from London where he had been studying elocution. He persuaded Peter Rezant, a classically trained violinist who came from Lesotho and was schooled at the Cape's St. Mathews Institution to team up with his wife Emily Motsieloa and the Merry Blackbirds were born.

"I first met Griffiths Motsieloa when he came down to Lesotho with his singing group the African Darkies. At that time I was a rag-timer and a great fan of Layton and Johnstone — I used to buy all their records. So when Griffiths' show arrived it was great and when they left I felt like a man standing in the desert with nothing around me. 'They're taking everything from my life', I thought — and that is the thing that influenced me to come to Jo'burg." This is how Peter Rezant explained his decision to form the band.

At that time there were only two other bands in Jo'burg. The Japanese Express was a small combination of a violin, trombone, piano and drums. They were led by a man called George "Makalman" Boswell — "die man wad die viool op sy pens gespeel het". The other band was known as the Jazz Revelers and led by Sonny Groenewald — the first man to introduce the saxophone into black South African music.

The Merry Blackbirds first followed the example of these bands, starting as a 5 piece combo. Rezant and a man called Isaac Shuping from Mossel Bay were on violins, Emily Motsieloa on piano and a trombone and drums were added. But the band did not stay small. Rezant decided to learn the saxophone and began expanding the brass section of the band.

This big brass sound made an immediate hit in the elite dance halls for blacks in Jo'burg. Then in 1936 they made their first impression on white South Africans when they played at the Empire Exhibition on a show boat in the middle of the Zoo Lake. In 1937 Griffiths Motsieloa formed a new vocal group called "De Pitch Black Follies" and teamed up with the Merry Blackbirds to go on a record breaking tour of South Africa.

From that time on the band began to move into the entertainment world of middle class whites. Throughout the forties and fifties they were a very popular attraction at white night clubs in Jo'burg. There were very few white bands who could match the big powerful sound of the Merry Blackbirds and the other black bands like the Jazz Maniacs and the Harlem Swingsters.

Rezant explains why this was the case. "The white bands were usually much smaller than ours. They were professionals you see, and it did not pay them to have a big band. Now we played music for the love of it and we were all working during

the day — so we could afford to form larger groups."

According to Rezant the band was designed to be a "spectacle" and performed best when called upon to play at large fetés and fund raising events. These ranged from the Cavalcades that were organized to collect money for the Goovernor Generals 'war time fund' to an annual event organized by the Communist Party where according to Rezant funds were collected to finance The Guardian — the Party's newspaper.

Because of these strong links with white entertainment circles the band did not contribute to the development of indigenous jazz forms — unlike the other big bands like the Harlem Swingsters — and the Jazz Maniacs who were far more strongly rooted in the popular culture of South Africa's townships.

While these bands were self con-

Very few white bands could match the big black sound

sciously developing a blend of imported American swing and the early marabi rhythms of the slumyards, the Merry Blackbirds insisted on playing strictly according to the Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Glen Miller orchestrations that they imported from America. Because of this there was a strong emphasis on technical music standards and no one could join the band without first going through a strict audition to see that they could read music.

Todd Matshikiza writing in Drum remembers how the band used to turn out at its performances. "Very smart — with kitty bows, nugget shines, toothbrush smiles and gold cuff links."

"Yes", says Rezant "as far as the white jobs were concerned our appearance was very important because we knew we were going to mix up with the top class. I mean the

type of people we were going to play to were the top class, not even the middle class. I used to play for the Barlows and the Schlesingers — that circle of people and one of the other class affairs that we used to play for was the graduation parties of Wits students. Oh yes, that's the thing that kept me in music otherwise I wouldn't have played at all. The hours were too long playing for blacks — from 8 in the evening to 4 in the morning."

This identification with white middle class tastes and values clearly reveal the class origins of the band. Their career also shows the frustration of a small black middle class caught at that time between their rejection of popular township culture and the repressive nature of class rule in South Africa.

In the late forties the band came under increasing pressure from white musicians who objected to the competition offered from bands that they could not rival in size and musical power. So they exercised their political power instead. A white musicians union was formed that began to put pressure on managers of nightclubs and other music organizers to limit the employment of black bands. When the Jazz Maniacs attempted to block the unions activities by applying for membership they were refused.

"This is the kind of thing that would happen" says Resant "We were offered a contract to play at the Wembley stadium. So the musician's union phones up the manger and tells him not to let us play. When he refused they phoned up the police who threatened to withdraw this guys licence. So we didn't get that job."

Exploitation in the recording industry was also a factor that the band had to cope with. Recording companies would at that time offer black bands about £1 for recording one side of a 78 speed disc with no royalties or copyright protection.

But other forces affected the bands career. Rezant remembers

how small the exposure was that the band got from the SABC. In the early fifties they were given a spot on the "Bantu" radio programmes. Rezant managed to avoid the pressure from SABC management to play rural ethnic music — an obvious attempt to bolster the ideology of apartheid — and for a while played American swing live over the air for half an hour on Saturday mornings. However this arrangement came to an abrupt end when the SABC demanded to record these live sessions without paying any royalties and the band left the studios in defiance.

Finally it was legislation passed

We played for all the top people. For people like the Schlesingers

by the newly elected Nationalist government that destroyed the band's career. Rezant argues that the bands appearance at Communist Party functions prompted the government to pass legislation that undercut the band's ability to get jobs at white functions — which the band depended on for their livelihood.

"The white man has got a voice you see. So wherever we appeared he would oppose us until the law was then read that blacks should not play at any place of entertainment where liquor is served — that simply blotted us out." This is how Peter Rezant sums up the situation when the band members decided to pack their instruments and retire.

Although their class allegiances cut the band off from any contribution to black South African music, the band did set a musical standard that was an inspiration to other bands. Also, despite their clear identification with white middle class values the band displayed a proud defiance when faced with the propaganda and commercial pressures of the official media.