

LEWIS NKOSI

Dollar Brand

"I believe I have found the language, I think I know the way." The words are Tom Wolfe's but they could issue just as appropriately from the mouth of Dollar Brand, the South African jazz pianist who has coined out of many elements and influences a musical language which is both tender and violent, serious and comic, a language which periodically reveals the menace of interior sounds and voices from the midnight violence of our South African streets recollected in the tranquility of exile.

Tranquility is perhaps a word one should never use in relation to Dollar Brand, either to describe a sense of physical repose, which he positively lacks, or artistically, to describe a form or reconciliation between the private and the public. He seems to be someone who continually experiences the public world as hostile and a threat to his private vision; and in turn his hostility and aggressiveness seems to the public a little gratuitous. Sometimes listening to him it has seemed to me that part of the disturbing violence which comes through his playing is the necessary result of this inability to compromise his private self or pay any attention to the social graces of the public relations man.

He drifted into London recently, hopefully home-bound after a three-year sojourn in Europe. He had played with a Danish string orchestra in Copenhagen for which he wrote all the music; and somehow that big band jazz sound had given him clues for the next phase of his musical development. In my house he was listening to the tapes he brought back from that "gig" and he was inwardly searching: "Listen to those whaa! . . . whaa! . . . sounds, man!" He was standing up, hands lifted in the air. The whole brass section of the orchestra was blaring; and there was Africa in the fierce tintinnabulation of instruments clashing like the cries of jungle fauna: "Those are the effects I want to get into my music. The piano has

become too limited for me. I can play it with my eyes closed." And in order to extend the limits of his favourite instrument, the piano, he had hoped to get back to South Africa where he was to put together a big band of home musicians. "Then," he said, "I can take this band on a tour of African states. Ja, Africa, man! That's the only place where music is still social. People live music."

IN THEIR SMALL FLAT in Dover Street, he and his singing wife, Beaty Benjamin, had their bags packed and were ready to leave in the afternoon. I was with them in a radio studio when the telephone call from Johannesburg came through freighted with the immeasurable burden of South African tragedy: apartheid. As it happened, the tour was being cancelled because the South African authorities would not only prevent Dollar Brand from playing before mixed black and white audiences but wanted the blacks also segregated into separate ethnic audiences of Africans, Indians and Coloureds. Financially, the concert tour would be a dead loss even before it started, and understandably the sponsors were pulling out, thus terminating Dollar's hope of a paid visit to South Africa. This news, coming at a time when Dollar Brand was ceaselessly flirting with the idiom of urban popular music as well as the melodic colourations of traditional African music, came as a bombshell. The lunacy of the official decision was beyond any logic.

Anguished and homeless, finally cut off from the life-sustaining tradition of native culture, we all got drunk that night. If Dollar Brand has suffered loss, South African audiences—even the cultural life of that country—will sustain greater losses. From Dollar Brand's minor tragedy can only come growth, for it is the mark of the adult artist to know and accept that in a deeper, symbolic sense maturity means: "You can't Go Home Again".

IF DUSTY SPRINGFIELD'S South African "mixed audience" fiasco was, as one newspaper termed it, "a storm that shook the pop world", then the cancellation of the Dollar Brand group's tour of South Africa, after a three-year spell in Europe, is going to ruin completely the Republic's jazz scene.

Internationally - acclaimed pianist Brand, bassist Johnny Gertze, drummer Mackay Ntshoko and vocalist Beaty Benjamin are all nonwhite. They were scheduled to arrive at Johannesburg's Jan Smuts airport on 12th March to start a four-month tour of the Republic's main cities before moving to the United States to which they have been invited by Duke Ellington.

HOWARD
LAWRENCE

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The cancellation of the tour resulted from the South African Government's latest apartheid law which prohibits public entertainment to mixed audiences. The penalty for infringement is R400 or one year's imprisonment.

The tour was arranged months before the promulgation of the new law but when the law came into effect it was obvious that the Government would not issue permits to the tour sponsors (Union Artists) allowing the group to play to mixed-race audiences.

The Dollar Brand trio was left facing the alternatives. They were: to play to whites only; to play to non-whites only; to play to separate audiences at separate shows; not to play at all but to come for a visit home.

THE BAN, COUPLED with the tour's cancellation, focuses attention on the South African jazzmen's tendency to brush off politics with the curt comments, "We are musicians, not politicians. We are not

interested in politics, we are interested in jazz."

This attitude, and it is an attitude that is especially dominant among white South African musicians, that jazzmen, because they are jazzmen, should have nothing to do with politics, has always amazed me. All their talk about "the truth, man, the truth, that's the thing" is never uttered in honesty otherwise they would face the truth that jazz has its roots in politics—the mournful hymns of the slave cotton-pickers of America's deep south and before that in the chants of the Black people who were kidnapped from the West Coast of Africa and taken to America to be sold as slaves.

And if those inaugural facts of jazz are too ancient for them to consider, then nearer home, in every session, concert or private blow and rehearsal, there is the anger, defiance, aggressiveness, scorn, curses of the Black musicians. Obviously their expression, like that of any artist, no matter his medium, if it is at all art, is influenced by his environment. And the

sword of Damocles over their heads.

It would be difficult to draw the line demarcating sincere cultural aspiration and rabid extreme nationalism, if one were unaware of Mr. Mphahlele's contribution in the liberatory struggle of the oppressed people of South Africa, which is no mean one. On the other hand many will feel as I do that cultural differences are not in the least an insurmountable obstacle in the way of a peaceful multi-racial coexistence. They are surely no reason for an assault on the culture of minority racial groups, nor is such an assault a prerequisite for the acquisition of a nonracial society. If I understand what Mr. Mphahlele means by the terms nonracial and multiracial, it does not necessarily mean that the existing ethnic groups which comprise part of the population of all

environment of the South African artist, no matter, again, the medium, including jazz, is explosively political. Perhaps it is because White South African musicians tend to evade commitment to finding a solution to this explosive situation, that they lack the depth and the fire that marks the music of the Black South African musician. Perhaps if they faced the fact that they are committed, as human beings, to play a role, they will find depth.

I HOPE THAT THEY WILL face these facts now that white and nonwhite musicians are prevented by politics from playing to jazz fans of all races. I hope they realise that the "truth" they talk about is commitment to one's conscience and that the real artists, though seldom flag-wavers or platform screamers, nevertheless play their part, and can only do this by facing the facts.

In South Africa the main fact is that no one can stand aside from politics and still claim to be honest. ●

Africa must become integrated culturally into what he describes as an "African way of life".

A contribution to and participation in indigenous African culture is desirable for those who so wish, but let us not be dictatorial about it. After all, the whole world has for some time now partaken of our culture in the musical sphere, without our having to ram it down their throats.

I hope that Mr. Mphahlele's warning was more a friendly intimation than a veiled threat for it would be tragic indeed if a man of his calibre and stature would seek to predetermine the course and fate of minority cultures. After all, we do not fight one tyranny in order to substitute for it another which is just as vicious if not more so.

JESOO RAMO

London

To the Editors

STR.—It is somewhat difficult to follow Mr. Mphahlele's argument (*The New African*, March, 1965), especially since he admits that he does not himself know the answers to the questions he poses, yet proceeds to issue an ultimatum (unless I have misread him) to the minority groups which are an integral part of cosmopolitan Africa.

The warning to people of Indian and European descent who have as yet not assimilated anything from African culture because they have turned their faces either to the east or the west for cultural inspiration is held like the

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