

FROM VOËLVRY TO DE LA REY: POPULAR MUSIC, AFRIKANER NATIONALISM AND LOST IRONY ¹

Andries Bezuidenhout
Sociology of Work Unit
University of the Witwatersrand

*Department of History Seminar
University of Stellenbosch
5 September 2007*

Music, movements and society

In December 2006 a crowd congregated for a rock show in Stilbaai, a predominantly white and Afrikaans holiday town. Zinkplaat, a band from Stellenbosch, performed before the main act, Bok van Blerk. According to an eye witness, the crowd pelted Zinkplaat with bottles. They wanted to hear Bok van Blerk sing his hit song 'De la Rey'. Members of the crowd proceeded to sing 'Die Stem', the 'national' anthem of apartheid South Africa of yore. When Bok van Blerk got onto the stage, he told the crowd that De la Rey was 'inside each of them'. Commenting on the De la Rey fad, Bertie Coetzee, a member of Zinkplaat wrote the following:

I met Bok when we performed with him in Stilbaai. I like him a lot, but I can't get my head around what he is doing, and the storm that is brewing around him. That evening the crowd spontaneously sang a version of 'Die Stem' immediately after our show. 'Stop your crap, this is the new South Africa,' the MC had shouted into the microphone just before he was cut off by the sound man. I also felt like that...²

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was published by LitNet – see http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=11123&cat_id=163. I would like to thank participants of a seminar hosted by the University of Pretoria's Sociology Department on 22 February 2007 for very useful comments on this earlier draft. I still consider this version of the paper a work in progress – I have only made minor revisions. Comments would be much appreciated: Andries.Bezuidenhout@wits.ac.za.

² "Ek het vir Bok ontmoet en ons het saam met hom opgetree in Stilbaai. Ek hou baie van hom, maar ek kan net nie 'n vatplek kry aan wat hy doen, en aan die storm wat besig is om om hom los te bars nie. Daardie aand het die skare spontaan uitgebars met 'n weergawe van 'Die Stem' net na ons show. 'Stop julle k*k, dis die nuwe Suid-Afrika!' het die MC oor die mike gebulder voordat die klankman hom afgesny het. Ek het ook so gevoel." See Bertie Coetzee. 'Ek sien twee pole verder uitmekaar uit trek, en in die middel, hier sit ek [I see two poles drifting further apart, and in the middle, here I sit]' http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=9985&cat_id=166 [Accessed 21 February 2007]

Since the launching of the song and its slick video showing Afrikaner women and children as victims in concentration camps and men in trenches and on horseback, the De la Rey phenomenon has led to a number of appraisals in the popular media. Two positions seem to have emerged: an optimistic reading and a pessimistic reading.

The main proponents of the optimistic reading are Tim du Plessis, editor of the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport*, and Koos Kombuis, one of the main figures in the Voëlvry movement of the late-1980s. Both see the popularity of the song as evidence for a new Afrikaner identity emerging – one that deals with issues of guilt and provides a more self-confident basis for challenging the many failures of the post-apartheid state. Du Plessis blames the ANC government for creating the conditions of uncertainty (including the perceived targeting Afrikaans names only for name changes) under which Afrikaners are seeking a new unity:

People are feeling more assertive than before. As if they want to say: we are fed-up with being singled out as the only scapegoat for all the evils of SA's racist past. Was it only white Afrikaners who benefited from apartheid? Is our whole history sullied and compromised? Did we do only bad things? We feel as if we are constantly being delegitimised and we are *gatvol*... Afrikaners are merely migrating to a new space. It's a natural, spontaneous process without the erstwhile marshals of the Nat party, the Broederbond and the Afrikaans churches... It's not the dead-end radicalism of the Boeremag, but it's also not ANC co-option personified by the acquiescent presence of Marthinus van Schalkwyk in the Mbeki cabinet... They had no choice but to become new South Africans. Now they want to be new Afrikaners.³

Initially Kombuis had been sceptical about the song and its impact, but changed his view after he had met with Bok van Blerk on the latter's request. He now sees the phenomenon as part of a new struggle against a corrupt and elitist government.⁴ As he writes:

As with Voëlvry back then, the movement has a spokesman; yes, it is this somewhat astonished, bruised, unwilling face of Bok van Blerk which the front adorns pages of our magazines. Like Kerkorrel back then. Again, the youth have something to say. The far-rightwing want to steal the energy, that is true, but before we judge too harshly, think about this: at least everyone has forgotten about the pathetic bunch of Idols winners.⁵

³ Tim du Plessis. 'Afrikaners: De la Rey rides again.' *Financial Mail*, 9 February 2007. <http://free.financialmail.co.za/07/0209/features/efeat.htm> [Accessed 21 February 2007]

⁴ Koos Kombuis. 'Bok van Blerk en die bagasie van veertig jaar [Bok van Blerk and the baggage of forty years].' http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=6473&cat_id=163 [Accessed 21 February 2007];

⁵ 'Soos destyds met Voëlvry, het die beweging 'n spokesman; ja, dit is die ietwat verbaasde, gekneusde, teësinnige gesig van Bok van Blerk wat nou ons tydskrifvoorblaai versier. Soos Kerkorrel destyds. Die jeug het weer iets om te sê. Die ver-regses wil die energie kaap, dis waar, maar voor mens te fyn volgens die letter van die wet wil sny, dink so daaraan: ten minste het almal nou van die patetiese klomp Idols-wenners vergeet.' Koos Kombuis. 'Die struggle het weer begin.' <http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi->

Both Du Plessis and Kombuis recognise the impact of the song on the Afrikaner 'right-wing', but underplay its significance. They point to the fact that Van Blerk removed an old South African flag from his guitar when a fan attempted to attach it to the instrument and said that there was a need to 'move on.'⁶ The singer also maintains that it is not his responsibility if people wave old South African flags at his performances, likening his predicament to the Springboks who face criticism because of old flags being waved at their matches. Nevertheless, the fact that Van Blerk met with one of the leaders of the Boeremag and publicly stated that he would be willing to play for the organisation, as long as they pay him, does send out mixed signals.⁷

Indeed, veteran journalist Max du Preez has a more pessimistic reading. He explains part of the popularity of the song by the audiences not experiencing it as referring to the Anglo-Boer War, but to current conditions where the main enemy is a government that is perceived to be black and hostile to Afrikaners:

There's not a word about black people in it. And while the song is in no way racist, it manifests itself – when young people stand there – when they sing about how nasty the British were to the Boer women in the concentration camps, and how general come and lead us, we will fall around you, they're not thinking about the British, they're thinking about black, the enemy is now black.⁸

Du Preez does not seem to have a problem with the song itself. His comments mainly relate to the public performance of members of the crowds who congregate to wave old South African flags. What does the massive popularity of the song mean for how we understand Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa? Is there a new wave of Afrikaner nationalism? If so, how do we understand this in light of other forms of mobilisation around 'race' and ethnicity?⁹ Do these mobilisations warrant concern that the so-called 'miracle' of the transition from apartheid might unravel and cause higher levels of violence than those currently associated with crime?

bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=10082&cat_id=177 [Accessed 21 February 2007]

⁶ Van Blerk was quoted in the media: 'Ek wil nie met die ou landsvlag geassosieer word nie. Ons beweeg aan. [I don't want to be associated with the old flag. We are moving on].' Marlize Scheepers. 'Bok sê aikôna vir ou landsvlag én 94.7.' *Beeld*, 1 February 2007, p. 2.

⁷ Bok van Blerk: 'He [Lets Pretorius, one of the Boeremag treason trial accused] thanked me for what we are doing and for the song. He asked me to perform for them. I was busy and I declined.'/ Ruda Landman: 'But you would go to a Boeremag audience?'/ Bok van Blerk: 'If they pay me, yes. Why not?' Quoted from 'De la Rey lives again' insert on Carte Blanche programme on MNet, 18 February 2007, online transcript: <http://www.carteblanche.co.za/Display/Display.asp?Id=3251> [Accessed 23 February 2007]

⁸ Max du Preez, quoted from 'De la Rey lives again.'

⁹ I refer here to the mobilization of ethnic symbolism in contestations over leadership (the so-called succession battle) between Thabo Mbeki and his rivals, notably Jacob Zuma, as well as the (not unrelated) contestation over leadership positions in the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) involving the federation's president Willy Madisha, and the drama around the election of Frans Baleni as the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Indeed, 'succession battles' involving ethnic mobilization also happened at the building blocks of the NUM – its branches. See Sakhela Buhlungu & Andries Bezuidenhout. 2007 [forthcoming] 'Union Solidarity under Stress: The case of the National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa.' *Labor Studies Journal*.

The waning of Afrikaner nationalism in the late-1980s led to a decline in academic interest the topic as well. With the transition to democracy, related questions such as the ‘race-class’ debate also took a back seat in favour a more policy-oriented approach.¹⁰ Hence, this seeming resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism in the South Africa of the 2000s has caught many South Africanist scholars by surprise. Some scholars did comment on the demise of Afrikaner nationalism as such. Francis Fukuyama linked it to the rise of a cosmopolitan culture among Afrikaners from the 1980s onwards.¹¹ More interestingly, and based on actual research, Jon Hyslop linked the ‘capitulation’ of apartheid’s supporters to the rise of post-Fordist consumption and the demise of the influence of what he termed the ‘pseudo-traditional organisational complex’, which included the state, churches, the army and the schools that had created an insular Afrikaner world since the economic successes of the 1960s.¹²

Nevertheless, Herman Giliomee’s most recent reappraisal of the history of the Afrikaners has shed new light on the matter. Giliomee pointed out that there had always been more enlightened versions of Afrikaner nationalism, and that the main concern was less about oppressing other people than about the survival of a people.¹³ The merit of Giliomee’s argument aside, what is curious though, as Pat Hopkins points out, is the fact that Giliomee paid no attention whatsoever to one of the most significant cultural movements in the history of the Afrikaners, namely the Voëlvry movement of the late-1980s.¹⁴

Assessing the impact of a cultural product such as a song on processes of identity formation and forms of political mobilisation is no straightforward matter. How songs are received (or rejected) and interpreted (or not interpreted) by audiences is hard to research. The aim of this paper is more modest. It merely attempts to understand the shifts that have occurred in Afrikaans popular music since Voëlvry, and to understand how lyrics embody changing ways of reflecting on the past and mobilising cultural symbolism. Specific attention is paid to rock music, since most of the lyrical innovation took place within this genre. Since Koos Kombuis presents Bok van Blerk as the new Johannes Kerkorrel, what are the links between Voëlvry and De la Rey?

My academic training as a sociologist specialising in labour movements is somewhat inadequate for the task of answering this question. Nevertheless, I hope some of my insights gained as a ‘participant observer’, as a member of an Afrikaans rock band, makes up for this shortcoming. I am also flouting anthropologists’ advice not to study one’s own tribe. But most interesting studies of Afrikaner nationalism that I am aware of were done by non-Afrikaans speakers who often do not grasp the subtleties of language and cultural references. Most neo-Marxist analyses suffer from this

¹⁰ Nicoli Nattrass. 1994. ‘Economic Restructuring in South Africa: The Debate Continues.’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(4): 517-531; Deborah Posel, Jonathan Hyslop and Noor Niefertgodien. 1999. ‘Debating “Race” in South African Scholarship.’ *Transformation*, 47: i-xviii.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama. 1991. ‘The Next South Africa.’ *South Africa International*, 22(2): 77-81.

¹² Jonathan Hyslop. 2000. ‘Why Did Apartheid’s Supporters Capitulate? “Whiteness”, Class and Consumption in Urban South Africa, 1985-1995.’ *Society in Transition*, 31 (1): 36-44.

¹³ Hermann Giliomee. 2003. *The Afrikaners: The Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

¹⁴ Pat Hopkins. 2006. *Voëlvry: The Movement that Rocked South Africa*. Cape Town: Zebra Press.

limitation and have tended to reduce shifts in politics to structural changes such as changes in dominance among 'class fractions'.¹⁵

For this paper my method is a limited one – essentially that of discourse analysis. I do not attempt to relate the content of lyrics to the structural shifts mentioned above. Nor do I deny the importance of an understanding of material conditions for shifts in discourse and culture. I am merely interested to trace the symbolic lineage of the outcome of the De la Rey phenomenon, and how this relates to the symbolism of Afrikaner nationalism as expressed in popular music.

Apartheid: Irony and the 'pseudo-traditional organisational complex'

In spite of valuable contributions on the significance of the Voëlvry movement¹⁶, there is dire need for a comprehensive history of Afrikaans music. The industry is characterised by its small scale and allows little room for experimentation. Profitable projects are generally based on economies of scale, or alternatively charging high prices in exclusive venues. Since the mainstream in Afrikaans music is so painfully mainstream anything that is remotely off the beaten 'backtrack' is usually described as 'alternative' or 'underground'. Indeed, the first successful response to the mainstream came from the *musiek en liriek* [music and lyric] movement from the late seventies onwards. People like Koos du Plessis and Jannie du Toit wanted to create quality Afrikaans music – music with a message. They succeeded in doing this, and the growing Afrikaner middle class became the main market for their songs. This movement had very little political content though, and actually sat quite comfortably with the Afrikaner nationalist project of the time. It gave middle class Afrikaners the respectability they sought after.

There were exceptions. Anton Goosen and David Kramer successfully penetrated this market, but their protest songs often were too subtle to make a large-scale impact. Hard-hitting songs were censored by the state apparatus. Very few of Kramer's fans knew that 'Skipskop' was a song about a community that made way for a missile testing facility, or that Anton Goosen's 'Atlantis' was about the forced removals from District Six. Coenie de Villiers criticised the army, and Amanda Strydom was ostracised when she dared to shout 'Amandla' at the end of a show.

The first real protest *movement* emerged from the underground clubs and theatres of Johannesburg – places such as the Black Sun and Jameson's. Performances were deeply political and condemned the apartheid regime in no uncertain terms. The following extract from a lyric, based on the tune of 'What a friend we have in Jesus', illustrates the subversive nature of the project:

*Wat 'n vriend het ons in PW,
Vlok en Heunis en Malan.*

¹⁵ Dan O'Meara. 1983. *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism*. Johannesburg: Ravan.

¹⁶ See Albert Grundlingh. 2004. 'Rocking the Boat in South Africa? Voëlvry Music and Afrikaans Anti-Apartheid Social Protest in the Eighties.' *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37(3): 483-??; and Hopkins, 2006.

*Hul hou ons land vir ons so veilig,
Kommuniste is verban ...*¹⁷

But to make a broader impact, the movement had to emerge from the underground and go popular. James Phillips (reinvented as Bernoldus Niemand), André Letoit (who soon changed his name to Koos Kombuis) and Johannes Kerkorrel embarked on a national tour – the *Voëlvry Toer* in 1988/9.¹⁸

Voëlvry represents an ironic phase in Afrikaans music. Instead of destroying the symbols of Afrikaner nationalism, irony was used to expropriate them for a different project. The ox wagon was changed into a ‘funky nuwe rock & roll ossewa [a funky new rock ‘n roll oxwagon]’¹⁹ by Kerkorrel, and the Voortrekker Monument was painted neon (it was the eighties!). The institutions that annoyed the more cosmopolitan segments of the Afrikaner middle class, what Hyslop has called the pseudo-traditional organisational complex, were knocked – the church, authoritarian schools, the state broadcasting corporation and above all conscription and the army. The fact that all this came from people singing in Afrikaans caught the Botha regime completely off-guard.

In his song ‘Boer in Beton [Boer (farmer, but also Afrikaner) in Concrete]’, a song about Afrikaners in the city – in this case Pretoria – André Letoit refers to several symbols of the Afrikaner nationalist project, including Paul Kruger, JG Strydom and HF Verwoerd, but these symbols become deeply ironic, since they do not represent the condition of urban Afrikanerdom any longer:

*Ek rook ingevoerede fags
Ek lees Engelssprekende mags
Ek gaan nooit kerk toe nie
Want dis ‘n drag*²⁰

Bernoldus Niemand also ripped Pretoria off as the quintessential node of apartheid compliance and administration. He described it as ‘Snor City [Moustache City]’, where people listen to country music and drive in their ‘Ford Snortina’s’, a combination of Cortina and the Afrikaans word for moustache.²¹ The following extract from the lyric of ‘Tronk’ [Jail] by Johannes Kerkorrel represents the suburbs where Afrikaner children grew up as a jail:

*in die tronk
is dit ‘n gewone dag*

¹⁷ What a friend we have in PW/ Vlok and Heunis and Malan/ They keep our country safe on our behalves/ Communists are all banned... Also see ‘*Die Nuus*’ [The News], a song performed in the ‘*Piekniek by Dingaan*’ cabaret and the *Voëlvry* concerts. The lyric is available in Hopkins, 2006, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ Grundlingh, 2004 and Hopkins, 2006.

¹⁹ See Hopkins, 2006, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ I smoke imported fags/ I read English speaking (sic) mags/ I never attend church/ Because it’s a drag... See Hopkins, 2006, pp. 22-23.

²¹ See Hopkins, 2006, p. 93.

*in die tronk
net soos elke ander dag
in die tronk
hoor jy laat in die nag
die honde blaf
laat in die nag
die honde blaf*²²

Barking watchdogs are typical of South African suburbs. He sings about ‘brains’ and ‘thoughts’ that are locked in chains – the inability to break out of the constraints of the pseudo-traditional organisational complex of Afrikaner nationalism. In ‘Ry’ [Ride], he sings about the need to escape from suburban life, and the snobbery and class consciousness of middle-class life in the suburbs:

*Daar is dié wat jou vertel jy mag nie op jou motorfiets ry nie
Jy moet jou plek altyd ken, jy moet die kos eet wat jy kry
Party is ryk, party sal vir altyd arm bly,
party sal aan die verkeerde kant
van die treinspoor agterbly ...
Ek het jare lank na 'n pad
uit die dorp gesoek
langs die spoor gestaan en gekyk hoe die treine ry
ek het gesien hulle kom
ek het gesien hulle gaan
en ek het gewag en geweet
'n kaartjie kom om saam te gaan ...*²³

Suburban life was also a key theme in the music of Koos Kombuis. In ‘Lady van die Bodorp’ [Lady from Uptown], he mocks the cultured existence of middle-class Afrikaners:

*Ek kuier in jou voorhuis
tussen mikrogolwe se gesuis
jou pa rook pyp, jou ma is kuis
en each status symbol's in its place
julle kennis en kultuur die wys
in elke meubelstuk se prys
jou broer studeer nou in Parys
jou ouma maak groentesop en vleis
die bediende is 'n mental case
in die nuutherontwerpte houtkombuis.*²⁴

²² in jail/ it's an ordinary day/ in jai;/ like every other day/ in jail/ you can hear late at night/ how the dogs barks/ late at night/ the dogs bark...

²³ There are those who tell you that you can't ride on your motorbike/ You must always know your place, you must eat all your food/ Some are rich, some will always be poor/ Some will always remain on the wrong side of the railway line.../ I searched for years for a road out of town/ Stood next to the track and watched the trains go by/ I saw them come/ I saw them go/ I waited and I knew a ticket would come for me to leave... See Hopkins, 2006, p. 116-117.

²⁴ We chat in your living room/ among the whizzing of micro waves/ your dad smokes pipe, your mom's a prune/ and each status symbol is in its place/ your knowledge and culture shows/ in the price

On an even grittier note, he sings in ‘Paranoia in Parrow-Noord’ [Paranoia in Parrow-North]:

*Ek weet ek is verslaaf aan drank
ek is oortrokke by die bank
my dogter is 'n boere-punk
maar dank God ek's ten minste blank ...*²⁵

Kerkorrel’s ‘Energie [Energy]’ applied broad sarcastic brush strokes when he sang about how Afrikaners’ lives were regulated:

*Jy moet staan in jou ry
Jy moet jou hare kort sny
Jy moet altyd netjies bly
Jy moet al die pryse kry*

*Jy moet altyd netjies bly
Trou en kinders kry
In jou karretjie ry
En stem vir die party*²⁶

Another of the artists of the Voëlvy era, Randy Rambo, also explored the pathologies of suburban life:

*Ons huis is massief en ons kar baie blink
Ons swembad is groot en die tuinjong so flink
Die dahlias blom mooi en die kinders is soet
Hulle hou ons naam hoog as hul oom dominee hoflik groet ...*²⁷

Apart from suburban life, the army as a source of irritation among Afrikaners, and white South Africans in general, was explored, often with a deep sense of irony. Koos Kombuis sang about the bar on the station in De Aar, where soldiers on their way to the ‘border’ had to pass through:

*Een ou lê onder
Een ou lê bo
Maar ek lê langs my cherry
Op die Transkaroo*

of each piece of furniture/ your bother is studying in Paris/ your grandma is cooking vegetable soup and meat/ the maidservant is a mental case/ in the newly designed wooden kitchen...

²⁵ I know I’m addicted to booze/ I’m overdrawn at the bank/ My daughter is a Boere (lit. farmer, or Afrikaner) punk/ But thank God at least I’m white... See Hopkins, 2006, pp. 120-121.

²⁶ You must stand in line/ You must cut your hair short/ You must always be neat/ You must win all the prizes.../ You must live in a little house/ Marry and have children/ Drive in your small car/ And vote for the party... See Hopkins, 2006, pp. 76-77.

²⁷ Our house is massive and our car is shiny/ Our swimming pool is big and the garden boy is hardworking/ The dahlias are in blossom and the children are well-behaved (literally ‘sweet’)/ They hold our name up high when they politely greet the (religious) minister (literally ‘uncle minister’).

*Die seats stink na rubber
Ek walg in my hangover
En ek dink terug aan laasnag
Toe ek ure moes wag ...
In die Bar op De Aar sit ons almal bymekaar
En ons wag op die trein na wie-weet-waar ...*

*Briewe van êrens met posstempels van nêrens
Bosse en gille, koffie slaappille
Met 'n botteltjie blou wat my twee jaar moet hou ...²⁸*

The 'letters from somewhere' with 'stamps from nowhere' refer to the fact that the apartheid regime denied at the time that they were involved in military operations in Angola.

Bernoldus Niemand's 'Hou My Vas, Korporaal' [Hold Me Tight, Corporal] became an anthem for the End Conscription Campaign:

*Hou my vas, Korporaal, ek's 'n kind skoon verdwaal
Gaan ek weer my cherry sien, as ek van die trein af klim?
Ja, sowaar, Korporaal, dis maar swaar, Korporaal
Ek speel oorlog met my beste dae...²⁹*

Kerkorrel also sang songs about the army, but in this case the army doing 'riots' in the townships. The following lyric was penned by Marianne de Jongh:

*Maar vannag gooi ek my geweerband weg
en ek haal my gordel af
as dit donker is, as almal slaap
is ek voor jou deur en ek wag
En sing die ou ou lied van Afrika
sing dit sag, sing dit lank vir my
maak oop jou hart, maak oop jou deur
laat my binnekom, laat my bly.
Blaas uit die kers draai jou kopdoek los
ek het lankal my tent vergeet
laat ons mond aan mond en lyf aan lyf
laat ons vry en vir altyd wees.³⁰*

²⁸ One guy lies on top/ One guys lies at the bottom/ But I lay next to my cherry on the Trans Karoo [train]/ The seats stink of rubber/ I choke in my hangover/ And I think back to last night/ When I had to wait for hours... In the Bar at De Aar we're all sitting together/ And we're waiting for the train to no one knows where.../ Letters from somewhere with postal stamps from nowhere/ Bush and screams, coffee sleeping pills/ And a little bottle of blue that had to last for two years (the duration of conscription).

²⁹ Hold me tight corporal, I'm a child completely lost/ Will I see my cherry again, when I get off the train?/ Yes indeed corporal, it's really tough corporal/ I'm playing war with my best days... See Hopkins, 2006, pp. 46-47.

³⁰ But tonight I'll get rid of my bandolier/ and I'll take off my belt/ When it's dark and everyone's asleep/ I'll be waiting at your door/ Sing the old old song of Africa/ sing it softly, sing it for a long time for me/ Open your heart, open you door/ Let me in and let me stay/ Blow out the candle take off your

The love scene between the soldier and the inhabitant of the township is most probably what makes this song so subversive. Like the 'De la Rey' song, it ends with military drums, but in this case, the drums are profoundly ironic.

Kombuis also explored issues of love across the 'colour line', which was illegal up until 1984. The following in an extract from 'Coca Cola Nooi' refers to the Cape Flats, where most of the 'coloured' ghettos were located:

*Toe vat ek jou na 'n wrede straat
met graffiti teen die mure en haat
snags is daar bendes en polisie wat baklei
maar steeds klou jy soos 'n label aan my sy
some say love it is a river
maar hier is saamwees stomper as 'n razor
how's your handle mate, rook nog 'n pyp
want die's mos die flipside van die Fairest Cape.*³¹

A part of *Voëlvry's* success can be attributed to their voicing the smouldering irritation with apartheid's grip on the personal freedom of Afrikaners. No wonder that it toured university campuses. But its success also imposed a limitation. It never penetrated the working class, and stayed clear of the townships – physically, as well as in terms of most of its lyrical content. The problem with apartheid was what it was doing to 'us' – alternative (but middle class) Afrikaners. The symbols and institutions of Afrikaner nationalism became objects of irony. Afrikaner nationalism was turned on its head, and in elite circles it became fashionable to be an 'alternative' Afrikaner. In a sense, the *Voëlvry* movement provided for an ethnic project without the ethnic politics. Yet, the foundation of this was a critique of what apartheid did to the 'self', not the 'other', which was present in the lyrics of the movement, but somewhat marginal. As Grundlingh argues:

The embryonic but palpable sense of imminent change and the appeal to new Afrikaner cultural and political sensibilities as well as the enthusiastic following it attracted certainly gave *Voëlvry* the appearance of a social movement. But the case should not be overstated. It failed to evolve beyond protest music, lacked wider connections, and did not inspire their followers to express themselves in unambiguous and meaningful political terms. At best it can be described as a moderate to weak social movement.³²

headscarf/ I've long since forgotten my tent/ Let us touch lips to lips, body to body/ Let us (be) free and forever... See Hopkins, 2006, p. 177.

³¹ Then I took you to a cruel street/ with graffiti on the walls and hate/ at night there are fighting gangs and police/ but still you cling like a label to my side/ some say love it is a river/ but here being together is more blunt than a razor/ how's you handle mate, smoke another pipe/ because this is the flipside of the Fairest Cape. See also 'Ontug in die Lug' – Hopkins, 2006, p. 109.

³² Albert Grundlingh. 2004. 'Rocking the Boat in South Africa? *Voëlvry* Music and Afrikaans Anti-Apartheid Social Protest in the Eighties.' *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37(3): 498.

Post-apartheid: From irony to nostalgia, romanticism and cynicism

With the end of apartheid, the ironic phase came to an end. James Phillips died, and Kerkorrel and Kombuis consciously became part of the mainstream – to varying degrees of success. For a while Valiant Swart and Paul Riekert's Battery 9 kept the scene alive. But no-one was prepared for the explosion in Afrikaans music that happened from the mid-nineties onwards at places like Oppikoppi and the Afrikaans arts festivals.

How do the current waves of Afrikaans music relate to the protest tradition of the past? I would argue that three strands have emerged. These strands are constructed around nostalgia (a longing for an innocent past), romanticism (escapism constructed around a denial of the negative aspects of life in South Africa), and cynicism (a critique of the direction of post-apartheid society, but without plausible programmes of action). In practice they are not mutually exclusive. What makes Bok van Blerk so successful, I would argue, is that he incorporates elements of each of these strands and combines it with a programme of action, even though this programme is somewhat vague.

The nostalgics converge in bars where popular singers do medleys of Koos Kombuis tunes, but without the irony. They sing along to traditional Afrikaans songs. Their t-shirts say: '100% Boer' or 'Praat Afrikaans of hou jou bek' [Speak Afrikaans or shut up]. The fact that the protest singers made it cool to be Afrikaans again suits them well, but they nostalgically long for a past without crime and affirmative action. Many of them are too young to remember this presumed carefree past.³³

The romantics play good solid rock, but their lyrics are about parties, love, booze, drugs, and sometimes our beautiful country. They build on the rock tradition of the protest singers, but see no need for protest. They are upwardly mobile consumers and not interested in politics. The Afrikaans media calls them the 'Zoid generation'.

The cynics celebrate their marginality and sing about crime, emigration, poverty, and the new fat cats in government. They keep some of the irony of the protest music of the eighties, but mostly complain about how things are going wrong. Some are tired of feeling guilty about apartheid. After all, they did not go to the army, nor did they decide to spend billions on a crooked arms deal. An example would be Riku Lähti and Jean Marais from the band 12Hz:

*ek's bly jy's bevry
nou kan jy en jou pelle in 'n groot kar ry
kyk na my
ry verby
lyk bevry
als goed in jou neighbourhood
met jou sestienkamerwoning is nou in jou bloed
eet vrek goed*

³³ For an analysis see: Bosman, Martjie. 'Die FAK-fenomeen: Populêre Afrikaanse musiek en volksliedjies.' *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 40(2):21-46.

*drink sterk goed
robin hood se voet
in jou suit
wonder hoe jy jou comrades groet ...*³⁴

Then there is the immensely popular song ‘Nie Langer’ [No Longer] from the band Klopjag:

*Hou op geld mors op naamsveranderings,
daar is mense sonder huise en kinders sonder kos,
wie is nou die sondebok?*³⁵

*Ek sal agter in die tou staan
my reenboog op my mou dra,
maar ek sal nie langer jammer sê nie.*³⁶

Die Melktert Kommissie sing in their song ‘Proudly South African’:

*Toi-toi-toi toys are us,
daar word met ons gespeel,
deur mense van hoër,
klasse is oorvol,
maar die kosblikke bly leeg,
en almal vreet net politics,
in plaas van aanbeweeg.*³⁷

By far the most interesting of the successful rock acts is Fokofpolisiekar [Fuck Off Police Car]. The surprising element of this band is that they still express alienation from life in the suburbs, and particularly seem to have a gripe against the continued role played by Afrikaans organised religion. The following comes from one of their most popular songs, ‘Hemel op die Platteland’ [Heaven in the Rurals]:

*Kan iemand dalk ‘n god bel
en vir hom sê ons het hom nie meer nodig nie
kan jy apatie spel?
reguleer my, roetineer my
plaas my in ‘n boks en merk dit veilig*

³⁴ I’m glad you’re liberated/ now you and your friends can drive in a big car/ look at me/ drive past/ look liberated/ everything is fine in your neighbourhood/ with your sixteen room house now in your blood/ eat very well/ drink strong stuff/ robin hood’s foot (or forget about robin hood)/ in your suit/ I wonder how you greet your comrades now...

³⁵ Stop wasting money on name changes/there are people without homes and children without food/who is now to blame? Translation from Oelofse, Louis. ‘Afrikaners take music into daring new field.’ *Daily News*, 7 February 2007, p. 6.

³⁶ I will stand at the back of the queue/and wear my rainbow on my sleeve/but I won’t say sorry any more. Translation from Oelofse 2007.

³⁷ Toyi-toyi-toyi toys are us/we are being played with/by people from above/classrooms are overcrowded/but lunchboxes are empty/everyone eats politics/instead of moving on. Translation from Oelofse 2007.

*stuur my dan waarheen al die dose gaan
stuur my hemel toe ek dink dis in die platteland.*³⁸

But Fokofpolisiekar have also been exploring issues of guilt, and express an irritation with guilt accorded to them due to the ‘sins’ of previous generations:

*my skoene is deur vroue slawe
in die verre-ooste gemaak
dis nie my skuld nie ...
my vriende se bediendes het hulle
met liefde groot gemaak
dis nie my skuld nie
ek herinner myself aan my pa
hulle moes grens toe gaan
dis nie my skuld nie ...*³⁹

Here the army is something in the lives of their fathers. Most recently, in their song ‘Brand Suid-Afrika’ [Burn South Africa], they sing:

*Landmyne van skuldgevoelens,
in ‘n eenman-konsentrasiekamp,
jy kla oor die toestand van ons land,
wel fokken doen iets daaromtrent,
brand Suid-Afrika.*⁴⁰

What these lyrics show is that there have been attempts by Afrikaans songwriters to engage with current political uncertainties. They have a critique of state failures and their being scapegoated for the sins of previous generations. However, they have not expressed these irritations as a new ethnic project. To be sure, they see themselves as part of a South Africa and want to contribute on the terms of a new identity and a sense of self-worth.

Lost irony

In spite of some innovation in lyrical content, there is still a limitation to this project. Like the Voëlvry movement, it fails to move beyond a consideration for the ‘other’, and in that sense, a transcendence of the narrow politics of the ‘self’. David Kramer criticised Afrikaans rock for its denial of the multiplicity of origins of Afrikaans language and culture:

³⁸ Can someone perhaps phone a god/ and tell him that we no longer need him/ can you spell apathy?/ regulate me/ give me a routine/ put me in a box and tag it as safe/ then send me where all the boxes (the Afrikaans word here can also mean ‘cunts’)/ send me to heaven I think it’s in the rural areas.

³⁹ my shoes were made by female slaves/ in the far east/ it is not my fault/ my friends were raised/ by their servants with love/ it’s not my fault/ I remind myself about my father/ they had to go to the border (between Namibia and Angola)/ it’s not my fault...

⁴⁰ Landmines of guilty feelings/in a one-man concentration camp/you moan about the situation of our country/well fucking do something about it/burn South Africa. Translation from Oelofse 2007.

In die afgelope 30 jaar probeer ek in party van my songs sê dat bruin en swart mense óók Afrikaans praat en dat hulle óók op die plaas gebly het ... Wat my altyd die moer in gemaak het, was dat alhoewel hulle 'n groot deel van my lewe was, was hulle altyd 'invisible'. Hulle was nie deel van ons geskiedenis nie. Ek dink die Afrikaanse/Boeremusiek het seker dieselfde geskiedenis as Afrikaans. En dit lyk vir my asof die oplewing van die 'ou liedjies' weer gebruik word as 'n kulturele glue vir die boere, sonder erkenning van die oorsprong of bydrae van daai deel vannie familie.⁴¹

Kramer criticises the musical style more so than the lyrics:

I don't find 'alternative' Afrikaans music interesting. The problem is not so much with the lyrics as with the music. This borrowing of the blues/rock/punk idiom is so tired and such an easy option... If we look at a genre like rock, then I'd say that what was once fresh, exciting and alternative (within the Western context, particularly America) became stale and clichéd a long time ago. That the so-called alternatives use rock (in a broad sense) as the musical vehicle for their lyrical expression is what I find particularly boring. Particularly in the light of our recent emancipation and the current state of American politics... So a kind of inbreeding occurs and a constant reworking of an idea that is so far removed from its source it becomes anaemic. So much of the music is bloodless and pretentious. Or nostalgic for a fictitious, happier time.⁴²

His own projects are an attempt to move beyond the constraints of Afrikaner music towards Afrikaans music in the true sense of the word – a music that transcends 'race' as a defining category. He explains:

[F]or me, the blikviool is not nostalgic, but a discovery and a confirmation of my premise about the roots of this music. It is a raw, exciting sound with the unique voice of the Kammiesberge or the Koue Bokkeveld. It is real and exists and it is played and enjoyed and danced to. It is connected to a painful history, and when you hear it, it sings of the past and the present and it is as jagged and as fucked as the musician playing it. And when you hear it, 'dan is jou bloed soos 'n snaar' and you know in your being because you were born here and because you are human that this is not someone else's shoes, this is not hillbilly waltzes or bluegrass.⁴³

⁴¹ In the past 30 years I have tried to say in some of my songs that brown and black people also speak Afrikaans and that they also lived on the farm... What always pissed me off was that, although they had were a great part of my life, they had always been invisible. They were not part of our history. I think Afrikaans/Boeremusiek (Boer music) has the same history as Afrikaans. And it seems to me that the revival of the 'old songs' is used again as cultural glue for the boers (Afrikaners), without recognising the contribution to the origins or contribution from that part of the family. David Kramer (in discussion with Koos Kombuis). 'Is Afrikaanse Rock 'n Leë Gebaar?' [Is Afrikaans Rock an Empty Gesture?]' <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/mond/kkramer.asp> [Accessed 21 February 2007]

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

This inability of Afrikaans music, with all its irony and reworking of the symbols of Afrikaner nationalism, to transcend definitions of the ‘self’, I would argue, is the context in which Bok van Blerk’s ‘De la Rey’ was launched. The difference in the way the song *is appropriated* is that it now provides for a programme of ethnic mobilisation. Indeed, a number of Afrikaner organisations have claimed the song for their programmes, including *Solidariteit*, the FAK, and the Boeremag.

But since the argument here rests on an analysis of lyrics, it may be prudent to show how the ‘De la Rey’ song works with nostalgia, romanticism, and indeed, a deep sense of cynicism. The song refers to the Anglo-Boer War, or the Second Freedom War, as it is known in Afrikaner nationalist accounts of history. It recalls the scorched earth policies of Kitchener, and turns the smouldering house and farm into a fire that burns within the heart of the Boer:

*en my huis en my plaas tot kole verbrand
sodat hulle ons kan vang
maar daai vlamme en vuur
brand nou diep, diep binne my*⁴⁴

The lyric recalls the nostalgia surrounding notions of suffering during the Anglo-Boer War. The song has to go far back indeed to find a moment when Afrikaners can be presented as victims. The romanticism lies in the notion of the Boerekryger – the Boer warrior – in the person of De la Rey:

*Maar die hart van ’n Boer
lê dieper en wyer
hulle gaan dit nog sien.
Op ’n perd kom hy aan
die Leeu van die Wes-Transvaal.*⁴⁵

Finally, the cynicism lies in the fact that the call to arms – during the Anglo-Boer War, as any call to arms of Afrikaners in the current historical period – is futile. Taking up arms can only lead to defeat.

*De la Rey, De la Rey
sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De la Rey, De la Rey
Generaal, Generaal
soos een man sal ons om jou val
Generaal De La Rey*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ and my house and my farm burned to ashes/ so that they could catch us/ but those flames and that fire/ burn now deep, deep within me

⁴⁵ But the heart of a Boer/ lies deeper and wider/ that they’ll still discover./ At a gallop he comes/ the Lion of the Western Transvaal

⁴⁶ De la Rey, De la Rey/ will you come to lead the Boers?/ De la Rey, De la Rey/ General, General/ as one man we’ll fall around you/ General De la Rey

The line 'soos een man sal ons om jou val' – the promise, or even the inevitability of being slain alongside the General, is seemingly the only hope the authors of the lyric could find. This is a hopeless promise, and deeply cynical indeed. In addition, the word 'Boer' redraws a stark line around identity, inextricably linked to whiteness. The irony of being a 'Boer in beton' fades into the past. Nevertheless, it is because the Voëlvry movement has rehabilitated those symbols that their successors can now present their new identity project as legitimate in the realm of popular culture. But this re-appropriation of the symbols of Afrikaner nationalism, it seems, has lost all its irony. It is nostalgic, romantic, and deeply cynical at the same time.