

17 Harmonies of Foreign Climes

Steff Rohrbach

The jazz historian Christian Steulet dealt extensively with oral history and was accustomed to engaging with its subjectivity and the shifting emphases that emerge through memories and recollections over the passing of time. He was similarly adept at the various methodologies to be employed in order to analyse and evaluate with the necessary objectivity whatever he found. We had known each other since the 1990s when I worked at the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and he was on its Foundation Board. He and I shared a mutual interest in jazz and he occasionally came to Basel, where I live, either to look through the archives of Basel's best-known international jazz musician, George Gruntz, or to visit the University's Centre for African Studies or concerts at the Bird's Eye, the renowned Basel jazz club.¹ And yet we never really got around to discussing the South African jazz musicians who had come to Switzerland in the early 1960s. Christian died unexpectedly in May 2020, not long after having begun work on the jazz history topic for the research project that is documented in the present volume. When I was subsequently invited to continue Christian's work on the project, it was clear to me that I would have to proceed as he had begun, by conducting assorted interviews with the people who had witnessed the South African jazz exiles firsthand and played with them.

After reviewing Christian Steulet's files, I decided first to finalise three interviews that he had conducted, namely with the pianist and composer John Wolf Brennan, whom I had known since the 1990s, with Barbara Pukwana, the widow of the South African saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, and Six Trutt, neither of whom I yet knew. Numerous details had to be checked and clarified, further information was often required, and the revised texts submitted to the interviewees for confirmation that the content was correct.

As it happens, Christian and I had already been planning to meet up. He had not yet managed to speak to the South African drummer Makaya Ntshoko (1939–2024), who had lived in Basel for a long time and whom I knew well, and with whom I felt I had a trusting relationship. So Christian and I decided to arrange a joint meeting with him. Things turned out differently, but Makaya still became the focus of my work for the current project.

¹ The "Bird's Eye" was founded in 1994 by the bassist Stephan Kurmann, who was also its artistic director until 2022. Kurmann worked with Makaya Ntshoko in several ensembles. See the interview with Kurmann in this book, and also www.birdseye.ch/ (accessed June 2024).

I first heard about Makaya in the mid-1970s when friends told me that they had drummed with him out in the forest. I was already familiar with Makaya's colleague Dollar Brand (*aka* Abdullah Ibrahim), whose music I liked immensely. I was always moved when I heard it on the radio. Friends told me that Brand had played several times in a small village in Switzerland. Precisely where it was remained a mystery to me – until I got involved in the current project and Six Trutt gave me the answer. I had seen both Ibrahim and Makaya perform – though not together. Later, when I set up a concert series in the 2000s on behalf of the Cultural Foundation of the Canton of Thurgau, I engaged Makaya twice: on 15 September 2005 with “Where’s Africa?” (together with Omri Ziegele and Irène Schweizer) and on 23 February 2006 with “Makaya and the New Tsotsis” (Andy Scherrer,² Vera Kappeler,³ Stephan Kurmann⁴ and Makaya again). Makaya lived in the same Basel neighbourhood as me, so for the first of these gigs, I drove him and his drum set to the venue, the Eisenwerk Frauenfeld. On the journey home, he told me how his great success with the musical *King Kong* in South Africa had led to a longer engagement in England.⁵ This was also the reason why he and others had been issued with South African passports in the first place. Some members of the ensemble stayed in Europe, but Makaya flew home instead. Dollar Brand had by now moved to Switzerland and asked Makaya to join him there and play as a trio with the bassist Johnny Gertze – they’d already often played together back in South Africa. Makaya accepted, and they thereafter performed regularly at the Café Africana in Zurich. And Makaya also told me of Joe Zawinul’s invitation⁶ for him to join the famous fusion band Weather Report that he had founded and led together with the saxophonist Wayne

² Andy Scherrer (1946–2019), the most prominent Swiss tenor saxophonist, who also taught and worked as a first-rate piano accompanist.

³ Vera Kappeler (born 1974) is an unconventional Swiss pianist with a classical and jazz training, and occasionally also plays the harmonium.

⁴ Stephan Kurmann (born 1958), Swiss jazz bassist, founder of the Bird’s Eye jazz club in Basel in 1994 and its director until 2022. See also the interview with him in this book.

⁵ The musical *King Kong* by Todd Matshikiza and Stanley Glasser was a hit in Johannesburg in 1959 and went on tour to London in 1961 where it was less successful, but at least provided several Black musicians (including Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela) with a means of leaving South Africa. See e.g. Tyler Fleming: *Opposing Apartheid on Stage. King Kong the Musical*. Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020. It is often stated in the literature that Dollar Brand was also involved in *King Kong* in London, but this tale is spurious. See also the chapters by Richard Butz and Bruno Spoerri in this book.

⁶ Josef Erich “Joe” Zawinul (1932–2007) was an Austrian pianist, keyboardist, composer and bandleader who wrote the hit “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy” for the Cannonball Adderley Quintet in 1966 and the title track of the Miles Davis LP *In a Silent Way* in 1969, one of the first fusion albums. He played on both that album and on Davis’s LP *Bitches Brew* (1970). At the end of 1970, Zawinul founded the band Weather Report with the saxophonist Wayne Shorter, which was described by *DownBeat* in 2001 as the “best jazz band of the last 30 years”. Initially, Miroslav Vitouš was on double bass, then later Jaco Pastorius on electric bass. The band broke up in ca 1986. See also the below interview with Stephan Kurmann.

Shorter.⁷ But according to Makaya, they already had a young Black man on the drums – it might have been Alphonse Mouzon, it's not certain⁸ – and Makaya didn't want to take the job away from him.

Pierre Favre⁹ was very close to Makaya. When I rang him to tell him that Makaya had died in August 2024, he replied: “Ah, I knew that something like this had happened. I sensed it because we were so close. We'd recently visited Irène Schweizer together in the nursing home, with whom we'd both played”. Pierre told me years ago how Joe Zawinul had wanted Makaya to play African music to him in Los Angeles so that he could record it secretly. But Makaya had realised what he intended doing, and refused. Pierre repeated this story when I visited him at home in Uster in Canton Zurich on 7 November 2024. “The way he spoke of me was the way I spoke of him. We opened up a world to each other, played together several times and liked each other. Makaya was such a pure and honest person”.

Makaya said to me twice in the Bird's Eye club that we ought to meet – but whenever I called him, he didn't pick up the phone. I tried over several weeks, then weeks became months. I wrote to him and put the magazine through his letterbox in which I'd published the interview with John Wolf Brennan. I suspected that he might have had bad experiences with the press before, so I wrote him a note, promising not to publish a single line of any conversation with him without his permission. Late one evening, I met him by chance on the street. He apologised and explained that he'd had a dental operation that made it impossible for him to speak. Another time, I bumped into him while shopping, but he was in a great hurry and scurried off through the racks of products. In short: Makaya didn't want to talk to me “officially” about his life story. Margriet Naber also had the same experience when she tried in vain to contact Makaya for her biography of John Tchicai.¹⁰ He had already told me a short version of his life, and ultimately all that remained was for me to accept his decision. I told him this at another chance meeting in the supermarket, but also mentioned that I intended speaking to people who knew him well. Makaya replied with a mischievous smile that I would do what I wanted anyway. “So I'll be doing the same as you”, I replied with a grin – and we laughed together.

⁷ The tenor and soprano saxophonist Wayne Shorter (1933–2023) was one of the most influential jazz musicians of his time. On the recommendation of John Coltrane, he joined the second classic Miles Davis Quintet alongside Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams.

⁸ Alphonse Mouzon (1948–2016), an American jazz and pop drummer.

⁹ Pierre Favre (born 1937 in Le Locle), an internationally renowned Swiss percussionist and teacher.

¹⁰ John Tchicai (1936–2012), born in Copenhagen of Congolese-Danish parents. Was very much influenced by Lee Konitz and was the only European to play a major role in the development of free jazz in New York in the mid-1960s. He later became heavily involved in the Frankfurt project “Jazz against Apartheid” together with Makaya Ntshoko and others. See Margriet Naber, *John Tchicai: A Chaos with some Kind of Order*. Nijmegen: Ear Mind Heart Media, 2021.

I revised Christian Steulet's texts and conducted my own interviews between January 2021 and December 2024; they have since all been read, corrected and approved by the interviewees themselves. Christian had already spoken to John Wolf Brennan about the impact on the Swiss jazz scene of the Willisau concert given by the South African pianist Chris McGregor and his band the Brotherhood of Breath in 1973. Christian had also visited Barbara Pukwana in London and Six Trutt in Ichertswil in Canton Solothurn. It was Six and his family who had provided Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim with a European "home base" for many years. But my two requests for an interview with Ibrahim, South Africa's most famous jazz musician, were promptly turned down. He didn't want anything to do with our topic. This was not surprising, for many people who emigrated because of apartheid are notoriously reluctant to talk about the time they left their homeland. But at least I was able to bring Six Trutt (then aged 86) together once more with the 89-year-old Ibrahim when I took him backstage after a concert given by the latter at the Kultur- und Kongresshaus Luzern (KKL) on 20 April 2023. But even on this occasion, it was still impossible for me to make any direct contact with Ibrahim. It was the last time that the two men met; Six Trutt died on 24 January 2024.

The American pianist Bob Degen, who has lived in Germany for many years, was a member of "Makaya & The Tsotsis" in the mid-1970s. I interviewed both him and Jürgen Leinhos on the same day in Frankfurt. The latter had helped to set up Jazz against Apartheid in Frankfurt alongside the South African bassist Johnny Dyani. Makaya had also played a decisive role in the organisation. I was furthermore able to visit Stephan Kurmann, the Basel bassist who founded the jazz club Bird's Eye and who now lives mainly in Brazil. It was Pierre Favre who introduced me to Makaya's daughter Rose – whom I didn't yet know – at the jam session "Honoring Makaya Ntshoko" at Bird's Eye on 16 December 2014. She kindly also agreed to be interviewed for this project. It's always a great pleasure to meet Niklaus Troxler, the great graphic design artist and the founder and longstanding director of the Willisau Jazz Festival. He engaged numerous South African musicians for his programmes right from the very start of his concert-organising endeavours, thereby enabling us to view our topic from a different perspective. Christian Broecking's mammoth biography of Irène Schweizer, published in 2016, also proved an important source, as it contains no fewer than 31 references to Makaya.¹¹

¹¹ Christian Broecking, *Dieses unbändige Gefühl der Freiheit: Irène Schweizer – Jazz, Avantgarde, Politik: die autorisierte Biografie*. Berlin: Broecking Verlag, 2016. It contains 479 pages. Also published in English, translated by Jeb Bishop, as *This Uncontainable Feeling of Freedom: Irène Schweizer – European Jazz and the Politics of Improvisation: the Authorized Biography*. Berlin: epubli, 2021.

In the person of Makaya Ntshoko, my research into cultural relations between apartheid South Africa and Switzerland became focused on a single protagonist of the South African jazz scene: a modest but unique, world-class drummer who escaped the inhumanity of racial segregation and oppression but who, despite all his talent, ultimately did not find the great happiness abroad that he sought, nor did he bestraddle the world of jazz as his gifts deserved. My conversations with his daughter, his fellow musicians, colleagues and concert organisers provide us with different perspectives on his life and work, resulting in a small-scale social study that could well stand as paradigmatic of the fate of numerous other South African emigrés. And these conversations also shed new light on Switzerland itself – a society that was ultimately unable to provide a real home for these South African musicians and their music, and which often offered only a disharmonious ground in which familial and cultural discord became entrenched.

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