

# **A reflection on the use of *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part* Harmony and South African music produced in the 1950s to 1990s in the history classroom**

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## **Introduction**

The South African History grade 9 curriculum covers apartheid South Africa from its inception in 1948 and focuses on the introduction of segregationist laws and changes in resistance against the apartheid government from the 1940s to the 1970s in South Africa. When teaching about apartheid in schools, there tends to be a focus on the big-man approach and history textbooks provide a patriarchal and Eurocentric voice to history in the classroom. As a reflection of this approach, in prescribing such content the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Social Sciences Final Draft (n.d :11) does not make reference to how music played a role or how music can be used as a teaching resource for this topic.

The purpose of this paper is to provide history educators with a different approach to teach apartheid in grade 9 and to share resources that I have used in my classroom with the hope that this will provide an in-depth understanding of all the stakeholders involved in the struggle against apartheid. This teaching method has allowed for a better engagement when dealing with history and for better retention of knowledge for some of my learners who struggle with a content-heavy subject.

According to Collinson (2023), films and music can be used in the classroom as an icebreaker to set the tone and to explore questions of representation, to tell stories, and to make theory tangible. Building on this view, I argue that the use of music and films

within the history classroom should be seen as a mechanism to allow for inclusion as it enhances learning and cultivates discussions and inquiry in learners. Their use allows for the inclusion of historical figures who might have not been widely known while facilitating learners' engagement. This is facilitated by the fact that music is relatable to all the learners and easily accessible. Music pieces tend to be short, hence they can be applied to a 45–55 minute lesson while learners can easily go back and listen to the same films and songs after the lesson.

## **The Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble and the Amandla Cultural Ensemble**

Such a lesson could look at the role of music in the resistance against the apartheid government through the Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble and the Amandla Cultural Ensemble. They would allow learners to explore ways in which culture was actively recruited to promote the anti-apartheid struggle internationally.

The Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble was a London-based ANC grouping that achieved considerable success in Europe with its agitprop performances incorporating narrative, poetry, and song. Mayibuye was established in early 1975, and despite its rapidly shifting and amateur membership the Ensemble was able to function successfully for approximately five years, raise international awareness about the anti-apartheid cause, and simultaneously raise consciousness within the movement about the practical ways in which cultural activity could further the struggle of national liberation.

The Amandla Cultural Ensemble, on its part, was formed in the late 1970s amongst ANC exiles based largely in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK)<sup>4</sup> training camps in Angola. This Ensemble was led for much of its existence by trombonist Jonas Gwangwa. Amandla Cultural Ensemble became a popular ambassador for the ANC throughout Africa and further afield in Europe, South America, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere. Unlike Mayibuye, it offered large-scale, increasingly professionalised performances incorporating choral singing, jazz, theatre, and dance. Its performances were intended not only to raise international awareness about apartheid but also to present an alternative vision of a more dynamic, inclusive South African culture.

This examination of the ANC's two professional ensembles thus represents an initial contribution towards understanding a significant dimension of South African cultural and political life, namely, the deliberate and focused role that music was mobilised to play in the struggle. The development and activities of these two groups also sheds some light on the

ANC itself, its changing attitudes towards culture, and its broader diplomatic strategies in exile.

## How can teachers use films and music as a teaching resource in the history classroom?

The first step when teaching this topic is to start with the textbook content and touch on the union of South Africa in 1910 and the formation of the ANC in 1912. It is crucial to pinpoint the presence of segregation in Southern Africa within this period and before the implementation of apartheid in 1948 and how resistance would change from negotiations and petitions to an armed struggle in the 1960s, while making reference to the various historical events that explain these changes in resistance.

After covering the content on the implementation of apartheid and changes in resistance, and before starting with content on the Sharpeville massacre and silent 1960s, the educator can introduce the film *Amandla: A revolution in four-part harmony* to the learners and list aspects that the learners need to look out for as a way to guide them through the film.

After the film, it is important to debrief and reflect on learners' experiences of the film. For this purpose, the 1 2 3 key feedback activity is a useful tool. The activity allows for learners to individually reflect in writing. After the debrief, it is crucial to implement what has been learnt in the film in a test format. I was able to achieve this by creating sources that included some of the songs that they heard in the film and asking learners questions that they would normally have to answer in a source-based questions test.

### Lesson Plan

#### Objective:

To introduce students to the concept of four-part harmony and its significance in cultural and historical contexts, using clips from the documentary film *Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*.

#### Materials:

Projector or screen

Access to the documentary film *Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*

Whiteboard and markers

**Activity Outline:****Introduction and screening of the *Amandla Four-Part Harmony* (1 hour 20 minutes)**

**Amandla:** A four-part Harmony

Begin the class by asking students if they have any prior knowledge or experiences related to the role of music in the apartheid struggle. Write their responses on the whiteboard.

Discuss the importance of harmony in music, how it creates depth and complexity, and how it can convey emotions and cultural significance.

Divide the class into smaller groups (if applicable), and provide each group with a specific question or theme related to the film.

For example:

- What was apartheid, and how did it affect the people of South Africa?
- How did music play a role in the anti-apartheid movement?
- What are some examples of songs or artists that were significant during this period?
- How did the four-part harmony style of singing symbolise unity and resistance?
- How did four-part harmony contribute to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa?
- What role did music play in the political and social movements depicted in the film?
- How was music used to resist the Group Areas Act?
- In what ways can music be a form of protest and social activism?

Start screening the documentary. Encourage students to take notes during the film and pay particular attention to their assigned themes or questions.

**Source-Based Question Activity****Source A**

**Song by Vusi Mahlasela *When You Come Back* taken from Lyrics.com**

**Listen online- <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/2165407/Vusi+Mahlasela/>**

**When+You+Come+Back#google\_vignette**

This is the unknown grave  
The one who died maintaining his might  
His will being so strong and musically inclined  
His sad melodies coming out like smoke from the wood fire  
And he sang

Mayibuye iAfrica, sing now Africa  
Sing loud, sing to the people  
Let them give something to the world and not just take from it

And we'll ring the bells when you come back  
We'll beat the drums when you come back home

We'll ring the bells when you come back  
We'll beat the drums when you come back home

We'll ring the bells when you come back  
We'll beat the drums when you come back home

Our lost African music will turn into the music of the people  
Yes, the people's music, for the people's culture  
And I'll be the one who'll climb up the mountain  
Reaching for the top of our Africa dais  
While the poor women working for the lazy  
Lord sing

Africa sing, Africa sing  
Sing, sing Africa, sing, sing Africa  
Let this illusion of memory be over from the people's minds and souls

Our lost African music will turn into the music of the people  
Yes, the people's music, for the people's culture  
And I'll be the one who'll climb up the mountain

Reaching for the top of our Africa dais  
 While the poor women working for the lazy  
 Lord sing

Africa sing, Africa sing  
 Sing, sing Africa, sing, sing Africa  
 Let this illusion of memory be over from the people's minds and souls

And we'll ring the bells when you come back  
 (When you come back)  
 We'll beat the drums when you come back  
 (When you come back)

We'll ring the bells when you come back  
 (When you come back)  
 We'll beat the drums when you come back  
 (When you come back)

1. What message is conveyed in the source?
2. Who is the author referring to when he speaks of the unknown grave?
3. Why will they ring the bells?

### Source B

**Meadowlands song written by Nancy Jacobs**

**Taken from Genius.com, <https://genius.com/Mango-groove-meadowlands-lyrics>**

<p>O tla utlwa makgowa a re        “Are yeng ko Meadowlands”        O tla utlwa makgowa a re        “Are yeng ko Meadowlands”</p>	<p>[Verse 1]        Have you heard what the white people say?        “Let’s all go to Meadowlands”          Have you heard what the white people say?        “Let’s all go to Meadowlands”</p>
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<p>Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, sithandwa sam  Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, sithandwa sam</p> <p>O t!wa utlwa botsotsi ba re (Eita!)  “Ons gaan nie; on phola hier”  O t!wa utlwa botsotsi ba re (Eita!)  “Ons dak ni; ons phola hier”</p> <p>Phola hier, phola hier  Phola hier sithandwa sam  Phola hier, phola hier  Phola hier sithandwa sam</p> <p>O t!a utlwa makgowa a re  “Are yeng ko Meadowlands”  O t!a utlwa makgowa a re  “Are yeng ko Meadowlands”</p> <p>Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, sithandwa sam  Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, sithandwa sam</p>	<p>[Chorus]  Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, our beloved place  Meadowlands, Meadowlands  Meadowlands, our beloved place</p> <p>[Verse 2]  Have you heard what the hoodlums say?  (Go!)  “We’re not going! We’re chilling here”  Have you heard what the hoodlums say?  (Go!)  “We’re not leaving! We’ll chill right here”</p> <p>[Chorus]  Chill right here, chill right here  Chill right here in our beloved place  Chill right here, chill right here  Chill right here in our beloved place</p> <p>[Bridge]  You might also like  Kinders van die Wind / Children of the  Wind (English translation)  Mango Groove  MY EYES  Travis Scott  TELEKINESIS  Travis Scott</p>
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	<p>[Coda]</p> <p>Meadowlands (Meadowlands)</p> <p>Meadowlands (Meadowlands)</p> <p>Meadowlands, our beloved place</p> <p>Meadowlands (Meadowlands)</p> <p>Meadowlands (Meadowlands)</p> <p>Meadowlands, our beloved place</p>
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1. Explain why Meadowlands would be considered a protest song.
2. What was the message of the protest song *Meadowlands*?
3. Where is Meadowlands situated?
4. What apartheid law do you think the song makes reference to?
5. What laws focused on forced removals during the apartheid era?
6. What role did music play in resisting apartheid laws?
7. Do you think the use of music as a form of protest was effective and why?

### 1 2 3 key Feedback activity

#### Instructions

**Give learners half a page of paper then ask them to write down their answers to the questions below.**

- 1- Name one thing that touched you the most in the film
- 2- Two things that changed your perspective on how you saw apartheid
- 3- Three emotions that you felt while watching the film

Using the answers from the 1 2 3 key create a silent conversation activity where the answers to the feedback activity are shared among different groups in the classroom. The learners need to make comments on what their peers have shared by writing down their thoughts next to the feedback provided by others.



## Concluding reflections

The use of music and the *Amandla: A revolution in four-part harmony* film in the classroom allows for constructivism as a theory to come to life. The film allowed for me as an educator to be a facilitator in the discussion around the role that music played in the struggle against the apartheid government. The learners were able to learn through the experiences of music written in the 1950s through the 1990s as various artists spoke about love, hope, the need to continue fighting, and to tell a story about what was happening in South Africa during the period of apartheid.

Through watching this film, learners in my classroom were able to relate the lyrics of the various songs to various parts of history or periods during the apartheid struggle. For example, they could relate the forced removals in Sophiatown and the lyrics of Meadowlands. Constructivism was evident in the classroom in that the learners were able to learn through the reflections of others, in this case artists who contributed to the music that would give hope to the population of South Africa during the apartheid struggle.

One of my grade 9 classes noted how some of the speakers in the film could not converse in English and the accent was very different compared to what they were used to, therefore they mocked them. This allowed for the question of why this is the case. In my classroom, this created an opportunity to have a discussion on what happened after 1967 when many young people would decide to leave the country to join the MK and Poqo in the armed struggle. It allows for a conversation on the sacrifice that those who joined the struggle had to make, including abandoning their education and leaving their families behind.

I encourage my fellow history educators to recognise and give voice to the power of music and its historical role in their classrooms. In my experience, our learners stand to learn a lot from such teachings.

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