

Speaker 1:

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Joanne Freeman:

From Virginia humanities, this is BackStory.

Ed Ayers:

Welcome to BackStory, the show that explains the history behind the headlines. I'm Ed Ayers.

Joanne Freeman:

I'm Joanne Freeman.

Brian Balogh:

And I'm Brian Balogh.

Ed Ayers:

If you're new to the podcast each week, along with our colleague Nathan Connolly, we explore a different aspect of American history.

Brian Balogh:

We're going to start the show in 1962 when one of the most celebrated figures of the 20th century found themselves in the grips of one of the world's most notorious regimes. The figure was Nelson Mandela and the regime was South Africa's apartheid Government.

Tom Borstelmann:

Mandela had spent most of 1962 abroad, as a representative of the recently banned African national Congress.

Brian Balogh:

Tom Borstelmann teaches global history at the University of Nebraska.

Tom Borstelmann:

And he had been engaged in promoting support in Egypt, in other parts of North Africa and especially in the United Kingdom. And then when he came back into South Africa in August, on August 5th of 1962, he was arrested by the South African police. Apparently from the best evidence we have, at least in part on the basis of a tip from the CIA, which worked closely with the intelligence services of the South African state.

Brian Balogh:

Nelson Mandela's arrest came in the wake of some important moments in South Africa's history. In 1948, South Africa's national party came to power on a platform of apartheid. Tom says the country had been segregated for a long time, but apartheid was a much more severe regime. As part of that platform, South African authorities started cracking down on the civil rights of the black majority. Then

in 1960, police officers killed 69 peaceful protesters, the event is known as the Sharpeville massacre and it contributed to the apartheid government's ban on dissenting organizations, including the African national Congress. But you're probably still wondering why did the CIA tip off South African authorities?

Tom Borstelmann:

So the US government had been in bed with the South African government, had been closely aligned with it since 1950. The original US relationship with the South African government was formed indirectly by military Alliance, because South Africa fought as part of the British Commonwealth on the allied side that the US was part of in World War 1 and also in World War II, so there's a longstanding relationship that's military and political that goes back. But it's really a relationship that accelerates because of strategic minerals, really after 1950.

Tom Borstelmann:

In 1950 the US and South Africa sign an agreement for the US to be purchasing future Uranium ore dug up in South Africa, and this comes at a crucial moment, because uranium at that point was thought to be quite rare. So the question was where the next batch of uranium would come from? This isn't a minor question, I mean this is the era in which the US is building its nuclear arsenal and making sure that it has the largest one, especially after 1949 when the Soviets detonate their own nuclear device for the first time. Access to uranium, it's hard to imagine a more important concern, and South Africa at least until 1952 from '50 to '52 appeared to be the future of uranium mining.

Brian Balogh:

Tom says that most Americans experienced the period after world war II as the cold war era, but this wasn't the case for most people around the world. In South Africa, India, in many other countries, the period after 1945 was one of decolonization. Anti-colonial activists were fighting for self determination from mostly white rulers. But this posed a problem for American authorities, they were trying to support the movement for independence, but they also wanted to maintain partnerships with the longstanding European allies like France and Britain.

Tom Borstelmann:

The simplest way to think about it is that the US understood that there were two great forms of injustice in the world, there was communist injustice and there was racist imperialist injustice, but they were much more concerned about the cold war problem, about the communist version of a sort of a totalitarian form of dominance of unfreedom. The question of racial unfreedom to Americans was always something that hit close to home, and that was, they thought something that could be managed in a more gradually reformist kind of fashion, but they were absolutely certain that the highest priority had to be stopping the expansion of communism or socialism in any form.

Tom Borstelmann:

So that meant lining up with a lot of governments abroad that were also anticommunist, even if they were quite unjust in the treatment of their own peoples. And among those, South Africa was the sort of ultimate problem, because they were the one last remaining white dominated state that explicitly rejected the idea of for human equality. So South Africa was just sort of a puzzle that American government policy makers had a very hard time resolving.

Brian Balogh:

Tom says American authorities solved this puzzle by reluctantly supporting the anticommunist apartheid regime.

Tom Borstelmann:

It's not that the CIA was explicitly cheering for apartheid, although sometimes it may look that way on the surface, they would much rather that the South African white folks had done differently than they had in their domestic policies. But those were much less important than preserving strategic relationship with the South African government and preventing what they feared was possibly a communist black majority government. That's what they were really concerned about. And it's true that the South African apartheid government was so brutal towards protesters that the South African communist party gained a great deal of moral authority and was closely allied with the African national Congress. So the kind of question of whether South Africa might've become a communist nation under black rule was not a complete fantasy, but of course it was a product directly of the brutality of white anti-communism.

Tom Borstelmann:

The one thing about this that is not always clear to people at this point in the 21st century, is the degree to which communism in theory, Marxism-Leninism was not primarily concerned with race of course, it was concerned with issues of class, but that the communist forms of government under the Soviet union had explicitly banned racial discrimination from 1917 onwards. So communists had a kind of reputation among racial freedom fighters around the globe as people who were dependable allies. That's a way of thinking that most Americans in the cold war really weren't aware of, they tended to think of communist as sort of evil people who were kind of robotic and oppressors of humanity, whereas from the perspective of a black South African, the 1950s or sixties or seventies, how many communists were on the right side? It's the Americans they weren't sure were on the right side, they were pretty sure they weren't.

Brian Balogh:

And all of that said, what specifically was the CIA's role in the arrest of Nelson Mandela?

Tom Borstelmann:

I don't know the exact role, what we know is that that former agents have admitted to having tipped off the South African intelligence service, because the CIA had much more extensive resources, both human and mechanical for spying on and monitoring dissidents, socialists, communist sympathizers around the globe. And they were busy doing that and they were just much better at it than South Africans, so they worked hand in glove with them, just as the CIA worked hand in glove with the French government, the British government and many other anticommunist governments.

Ed Ayers:

Nelson Mandela was in prison for 27 years, he was finally set free on February 11th, 1990.

Joanne Freeman:

So in honor of the 30th anniversary of Mandela's released from prison, we wanted to explore the complicated history of the United States and its relationship to South Africa.

Brian Balogh:

You'll hear more from Tom Borstelmann about how US policy towards South Africa changed over the 20th century. And you'll learn about the musical connections between the two countries during apartheid.

Joanne Freeman:

But first we're going to look at how African Americans worked hand in hand with black South Africans to protest racial injustice at home and abroad. And to help us tell the story, we're going to bring in a few voices. The first is Amanda Joyce Hall, she studies the global anti-apartheid movement, and she recently spent time in South Africa interviewing anti-apartheid activists. Amanda says there are some striking similarities between Jim Crow segregation and the apartheid regime, but there were some important differences too.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

They were similar in that they were both anti-black caste systems that economically exploited, politically disenfranchised and culturally denigrated black people. Both systems were undergirded by federal and state laws, by local customs and by in discriminant racial terror and sexual violence. But there were also ways in which they were different, the major and most obvious factor being that in South Africa, black people are a majority that are being denied rights to participate in the polity by a white minority, and obviously in the US the circumstances are different with black people being a smaller percentage of the population.

Joanne Freeman:

Amanda says, another important difference was the civil rights available to African Americans versus black South Africans.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

In 1896 we have the US Supreme court decision, Plessy versus Ferguson, that legalizes segregation in the United States under the albeit false pretense of separate but equal, and I think it's important to note that there is no such pretense of equality between black and white populations in South Africa in the program for separate development and in the program of apartheid. So to summarize, the US was a more duplicitous in its brand of white supremacy. And Malcolm X notes this when he gives the speech comparing the US and South Africa in England in the 1960s, he says that he has way more respect for a person who tells you to his face that he doesn't like you and doesn't want to see you and doesn't want you in his country, and he's referring to South Africa. Than he does for the United States, that will pretend like there is a possibility for democracy while at the same time being underhanded and reinforcing aspects of white supremacy in the polity.

Joanne Freeman:

Malcolm X was just one of several African American leaders who inspired black South Africans, just as Nelson Mandela inspired the world many years later, some of the others, Martin Luther King jr and Mohammed Ali.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

A place where we see the civil rights leadership directly in conversation with what's going on in South Africa is in Martin Luther King's 1964 speech, when he goes to receive the Nobel peace prize in Oslo, Norway.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

Today I come to Oslo as a trustee, inspired and with renewed dedication to humanity-

Amanda Joyce Hall:

In the speech, the first half of the speech, he's talking about a need for civil rights in the United States, but the second half he moves to condemning apartheid in South Africa.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

... You honor the dedicated pilots of our struggle, who has said at the controls as a freedom movement sought into orbit. You honor once again, Chief Luthuli of South Africa, who struggles with and for his people, are still met with the most brutal expression of man's inhumanity to man-

Amanda Joyce Hall:

We kind of see the ways that civil rights leadership are trying to make people think about this enemy of white supremacy as having kind of multiple permutations in different locations.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

The black press in South Africa was operating under extreme censorship and could not report on political activities that were happening within the country or that were happening among black South African groups. But the black press did frequently comment and report and write articles on events that were happening in the black international world.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

They frequently reported on black radicalism in the United States, reporting on the showdowns between the Black Panthers and the police in the United States, they reported on the trials of Angela Davis. So we see black radicalism in the United States making this feature and the South African black press. It's reported in a way where they are championing these actions. Occasionally they described black power and how black power became a source of inspiration and how it was analogous to an extent to the black consciousness movement, which is the youth movement that begins in the late 1960s, early 1970s in South Africa.

Amanda Joyce Hall:

But also in the interviews, and this also came up in the press, was the way that black cultural figures became prominent during the 1970s in South Africa, so the biggest example is Muhammad Ali. The image of Muhammad Ali is everywhere in the black press following every single boxing tournament that he does in South Africa. And when I asked them what about this, why Muhammad Ali was such a big deal in South Africa? He just said it was inspiring to just see a black man punch back and fight back.

Ed Ayers:

Okay, we're going to bring in one other voice in this topic, Robert Trent Vinson teaches history at the college of William and Mary, and he spent a lot of time thinking about the connections between black America and South Africa. Robert says that in the 1980s, Americans were bombarded with images of violence between the South African government and anti-apartheid activists.

Robert Trent Vinson:

Turning on the TV we saw the armored vehicles, police and army units in the townships, really very aggressively attacking black activists, black residents.

Ed Ayers:

As a young black teenager growing up in South central Los Angeles, Robert saw similarities between the South African police on TV and the police in his own neighborhood.

Robert Trent Vinson:

Because the police for us felt like a type of occupying presence in our lives, and they were very forceful in their enforcement of the law. One of the vehicles they used was called the Batteram, we called it that, they were sort of small armored tank units, and they were used to sort of bust into houses that were suspected to be drug houses. And sometimes they got it wrong, they bust into some little old grandmothers house and cause all sorts of chaos. We saw the same thing in South Africa, a similar kind of vehicle busting into the homes of black South Africans in the townships, they were called hippos there, so our batteram for their hippos. And in a way it felt it was a similar dynamic of surveillance and enforcement of a law that sometimes you were on the wrong side of whether you did anything or not.

Ed Ayers:

Robert says black Americans and South Africans connected both politically and culturally over the struggle against white supremacy.

Ed Ayers:

(singing)

Ed Ayers:

In the late 19th century for instance African American missionaries built churches and established relationships with black South Africans who were looking for more black led Christian institutions. The American gospel group, the Virginia Jubilee singers who likely performed an arrangement very similar to this one, gave over 1000 performances in South Africa over five years.

Ed Ayers:

(singing)

Ed Ayers:

The members of Virginia Jubilee singers were all formerly enslaved people, and black South Africans found their music profoundly moving. Robert says they recognize their story of suffering, but also the promise of salvation in the songs that they sing.

Robert Trent Vinson:

So, in the songs, these are the sorrow songs, this are the spirituals that come out of slavery. So they speak of the sorrow and the suffering that 246 years of American slavery have rocked, but they also, those sorrow songs are also speaking to ultimate deliverance and salvation. So black South Africans are really paying attention to this because they're just coming under colonialism, independent societies have been conquered by this point, and they're trying to wrestle with what it means to be under white domination. And they see despite individual differences in their struggles, local differences, that there's

a broader connection that they have to fight against, right? So this is a term that, W.E.B. Du Bois actually gives us, the global color line, but these folks see that in the 1890s, they're articulating this idea of a global color line, which is why they need to link up their struggles. So we see that dynamic happening early then, we really see it taking off with the Marcus Garvey movement, the UNIA.

Marcus Garvey:

... [inaudible 00:20:53] all men regardless of color are created in the image of God.

Ed Ayers:

Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican political activist based in the United States, in 1914, he launched the Universal Negro Improvement Association or the UNIA. The group advocated for black Americans to return to Africa and establish their own society, independent from their white oppressors.

Marcus Garvey:

... Because if Negroes are created in God's image, and Negroes are black, then God must in some sense be black.

Ed Ayers:

Garvey's goal of unifying the African diaspora, also known as pan Africanism appealed to black South Africans.

Robert Trent Vinson:

He's articulating this idea of black political independence, economic autonomy, and full control over religious, social, cultural institutions, a self contained black world, if you will. In which black people could live to their full potential, be full citizens in a newly independent Africa. And so because he's articulating race as a fundamental organizing force, this is attractive particularly in the places of Africa where race is really predominant. And yes, colonialism in Africa argues that race matters from the perspective of the European colonialist, but it really, really is emphasized in South Africa, where we get a heightened form of colonialism, segregation and then a hyper form of colonialism called apartheid. And so because race means so much more in South Africa than even in other parts of Africa, the race based appeal of Garveyism really takes off in South Africa as well.

Ed Ayers:

And Garvey remains popular for a long time there, he gives black South Africans a language of aspiration for a long time, even longer than they had the United States, is that right?

Robert Trent Vinson:

Absolutely. So for Garveyites in South Africa, the larger language of Pan-Africanism that you're connected to a whole race of people across Africa, across the African diaspora, means that you're not a native. And so that term native articulated by white South Africans was to suggest less than, not a full citizen, but a native, someone who is parochial, whose narrow, whose identity is based on narrow ethnic identities, not larger national or international identities. So just the idea that you're a Garveyite, and some of them may even call themselves Americans to identify themselves with African Americans, was suggested a larger pan African identity and suggested that there was a broader destiny to attack this global color line.

Ed Ayers:

So does Nelson Mandela absorb some of this spirit inspired by Garvey?

Robert Trent Vinson:

Mandela comes to maturity aware of Garvey, aware of other African Americans like WB Du Bois, sporting figures like Jack Johnson and particularly Joe Lewis defeating German boxers, in the case of Joe Lewis on the Eve of World War II, and obviously Nazi Germany articulating these ideas of Alien race supremacy. Folk like Joe Lewis have this out-sized sociological impact, because again boxing in the ring, it's a fair fight. Let the best man win, and this becomes a metaphor for African Americans and black South Africans that if only the playing ground was level we can achieve like any other race and indeed exceed expectations and even go beyond.

Robert Trent Vinson:

So the idea of the African American and particularly the idea of the American, African American who achieves, who is successful despite handicaps or discrimination, these are inspirational examples that black South Africans like Mandela are aware of, and draw inspiration from.

Ed Ayers:

I feel strangely patriotic knowing that African Americans were inspiring people on the other side of the world, and we're really grateful to you for telling us the story today.

Robert Trent Vinson:

Right, but I think to bring this full circle from the Virginia Jubilee singers in the 1890s and the admiration black South Africans had to these African Americans, I well remember Mandela coming out of jail, and first of all, not fully recognizing him because we didn't have an image of him for 27 years, so we had this much younger man in our head. But when he walked out of jail, we looked at him, we, meaning Americans, my group of African Americans looked at him as almost a Messiah figure Ayers, not just a leader of a black South Africans, but a potential leader for us too. My generation particularly were looking for new heroes, Malcolm X was long dead, Martin Luther King long assassinated, right? And we were sort of looking around, who was the next leader, if you will? And Mandela was that for us, and when he made a tour of the US in 1990, it was almost like a reversal of the old model of black South Africans looking toward African Americans, it was really African Americans, at least in my world and me, that were looking to Mandela to be our leader too, to be a global statesman, and not just for black South Africans, not just for African Americans, but a statement for the world. A model for the world.

Ed Ayers:

Robert Trent Vinson is a professor of history at the college of William and Mary, he's the author of the Americans Are Coming. Dreams of African American liberation in segregationist South Africa. You also heard from Amanda Joyce Hall, a PhD candidate in the department of history at Yale university.

Brian Balogh:

Earlier in the show you heard from Tom Borstelmann about the CIA's role in Nelson Mandela's arrest, we're going to return to my conversation with him to learn about what role, if any, American officials played in Mandela's release from prison. But before we get there, Tom takes us back to the late 1970s

and the early 1980s. He says, there was a tension in the United States between a growing anti-apartheid movement and the conservative president Ronald Reagan.

Tom Borstelmann:

When you mention Reagan, it's important that Reagan and Margaret Thatcher the prime minister of England at the same time through most of the 1980s, both of them were crucial supporters of the anticommunist apartheid regime. Absolutely. It is also true that by 1986, all that organizing in the US, in the UK, in Europe, both Western and Eastern Europe, all that organizing had raised consciousness across the globe about the now increasingly obvious and sort of radically visible injustices in the rule of the apartheid regime, which had reached extraordinary levels of violence by the early 1980s. So by 1986, the US Congress passes the economic sanctions, the comprehensive anti-apartheid act of 1986. Reagan himself vetoes it, and the veto was overwritten by a Senate that has a Republican majority. Reagan is at odds with his own party at that point, he's sort of holdout.

Tom Borstelmann:

It was an indicator of just how far the struggle against apartheid had come and the importance of the international sanctions, which helped to bring an end to apartheid within a few years, by 1990 of course, February 11th of 1990, famously Nelson Mandela is released from prison and that's just four years after the American sanctions go into effect.

Brian Balogh:

Could you put those economic sanctions against South Africa in the larger perspective of effectiveness of sanctions? Are they seen as one of the leading examples of instances where economic sanctions can actually yield results?

Tom Borstelmann:

They are, in the case of South Africa by the time the US gets onboard with the 1986 comprehensive sanctions act, the US is one of the last to engage in a sort of serious set of economic limitations on trade with an investment in South Africa. So there's a kind of unanimity in world opinion by that point, which makes the sanctions that much more powerful when the US puts them on. Now, the US of course has the largest economy in the world, in the case of South Africa, you have this enormous internal organized uprising that by 1985 is huge and it's bringing the country and its economy to a halt, while at the same time there is extraordinary level of unified international pressure of banks not loaning money to the South African government, of corporations not building plants there for factories, of not trading with the region, not investing in the country, in South Africa. So that's a kind of internal and external combination that was fantastically powerful.

Brian Balogh:

And stepping back, in spite of the global anti-apartheid movement, do you think it would have been possible for the American government to warm to Nelson Mandela, were it not for the warming, so to speak, of the cold war and eventually the end of the cold war, take out that Mandela is released at just about the time that the cold war is coming to an end.

Tom Borstelmann:

It's essentially close to three months after the fall of the Berlin wall, three months and two days. So it's not a coincidence. The whole longterm process by which in South Africa, anti-communism served as a

cover for racial totalitarian rule that falls apart with the end of the cold war. So it changes the dynamic and you're asking about a counterfactual situation, and counter-factuals are always tough, right? Because one level they don't really [inaudible 00:31:34] possible to resolve, but they're crucial for us to think through, and I appreciate the question in that regard, because otherwise it's hard for us since we're not social scientists to measure what might have been different and therefore which factors are more significant than others.

Tom Borstelmann:

So if you'd not had an end to the cold war, it's not at all clear that the US relationship with South Africa would have developed the way it did, I mean, that did resolve the problem. The U S certainly could have come around to warming its relationship with the ANC, even if the Soviet union still existed on into the 1990s. That's possible. The level of resistance to apartheid had reached staggering effect by 1985, so it's imaginable, but who knows exactly how it would have been. I could offer one remarkable scene that I think is maybe the best one of the changed US relationship with Mandela and with the ANC, and with black South Africa after the end of apartheid.

Tom Borstelmann:

But the image that sticks with me is a photo, I think it was probably in the New York times, from 19... I think it was 1997, in the late 1990s, one of Mandela's many trips abroad, and this one to the US, where he goes and gives a talk, a speech to a joint session of Congress. He's invited there and at this point everybody loves him, it's post cold war and people have, just like they've sort of re-imagined Martin Luther King as this figure of great ease and comfort to elite white former segregation. They re-imagined Mandela as also sort of making them feel good about themselves.

Tom Borstelmann:

So this almost entirely white set of Congress people and senators are sort of lauding cheering for Mandela and then taking photos with him afterwards, and when the best part of the whole photo shoot was early on when Strom Thurmond, who's still alive, still in the Senate at age 99, which is why I think it was 97, because I think he died in '98.

Brian Balogh:

And I wish you just say notorious segregationist.

Tom Borstelmann:

Yeah, he's the former South Carolina Governor, and also a former candidate at the Dixiecrats, the breakaway segregationist Democrats for the presidency in 1948, and thanks to the civil rights movement in the US to the black freedom struggle, he had changed his tune, like politicians will do, and his constituents changed, so did he. And then you get this picture of him holding up his R [inaudible 00:34:05] next to Mandela, the two of them grasping hands the way Victoria's combinations will win. And this huge smile, his teeth aren't so good anymore, Thurmond. But here's Mandela, the former black freedom fighter for South Africa, and here's Thurmond, the symbol of everything opposed to Mandela's lifelong struggle with these huge smiles in front of the camera, it was a wonderful end to the 20th century.

Brian Balogh:

But time moves on, and tell me if this is true, I find it incredible that Nelson Mandela was on the terrorist watch list in the United States until 2008.

Tom Borstelmann:

Yes, this apparently was true, and I don't know the full backstory on why that lingered that long. How much of that was sort of oversight, how much of it was sort of a knowing act by racially non liberal members of the state department or others who might... Yeah, I find that hard to imagine, I think it was probably more a result of oversights, but it's hard to know. But that's the old problem of one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, and those things are not... At one level it's just sort of a cliché that doesn't reveal much, but it's also true that people's... when context changes, people see things differently, and it's only after the US has finally eliminated its own forms of formal racial segregation and violence that Americans can begin to see a little more clearly, it's like they get bifocals about South Africa as a result.

Brian Balogh:

Tom Borstelmann teaches global history at the university of Nebraska, Lincoln. He's the author of many books including *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War*, and *The Cold War and the Color Line: American race relations in the Global Arena*. While politicians and diplomats navigated a shift in relationship between the US and South Africa during apartheid, another channel fostered a unique cultural connection between the two countries. And this one was much more musical in nature.

Louis Meintjes:

Urban African musicians in and around Johannesburg, they were listening to Atlantic records, they were listening to Motown [inaudible 00:36:58], others were listening and very deeply tied in with jazz, others were listening to gospel music, et cetera. So there was a huge influx and acute attention that was paid to popular music coming out of the United States.

Brian Balogh:

Louis Meintjes grew up in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, her family lived in Pretoria, the administrative capital of the country outside of Johannesburg. Growing up, she learned to play classical music on the violin, but she says a range of pop music swirled around her.

Louis Meintjes:

There was lots of other music going on around me both on the radio, in the streets, in the backyards, in the suburbs, and that was the most magnificent, compelling African popular music.

Brian Balogh:

Louis has spent her career as an ethnomusicologist, studying various kinds of South African music. She's also researched links between South African and American music. She says popular American music could often be heard over the radio, but the radio was a complicated device in apartheid South Africa, embedded in its frequency was something more conniving than just a broadcast of the latest hits.

Louis Meintjes:

Well, radio has been absolutely crucial to the sort of structuring of apartheid, that a radio during apartheid was state owned, state regulated, music was censored, radio stations were divided on the basis of language, it was both a tool for the apartheid state, and also a source of great pleasure for a lot of South Africans who heard music through the radio.

Brian Balogh:

So the state was trying to use radio to divide people, segment in various geographic and racial other identities. Did people try to circumvent that with music?

Louis Meintjes:

Yes, not necessarily deliberately so, it was style such as Mbaqanga for instance, which was this kind of soul inflective [GarageBand 00:39:06] style. This was a studio produced sound, these were musicians who were completely using the radio despite the fact that it was state owned apartheid radio. For some listeners, particularly later in the liberation struggle, Mbaqanga musicians were criticized for being [foreign language 00:39:33] because they didn't sing politically explicit lyrics, and because they were so integrated into the state radio, but yet one has got to look back and say, well actually these musicians we're doing something different, these musicians were singing about everyday life in many ways, and singing about everyday life, they were therefore singing about everyday struggle.

Louis Meintjes:

They were looking to sounds across the ocean, they were integrating and making their own sounds from soul and Motown and Atlantic records, et cetera, and making it their own. And that was an incredibly interesting and important move. That is to say these were musicians who were living in townships, that is in urban areas around the cities, and who thought of themselves as urban residents, as South African citizen, as people of the world, as modern cosmopolitans, connected into international ideas. To present all that in sound without saying so necessarily explicitly is also to say we are not rural South Africans, we are not South Africans who sing only in one language or speak only in one language, we are urban modern people, and that was really counter to what the apartheid state was trying to do, right?

Louis Meintjes:

So this is at a time when African South Africans are being evicted, and on the basis of some phony idea of what constitutes an ethnic group, and who fits into which ethnic group they are being designated to different so-called homelands in South Africa. So to sing whether kind of soul inflicted sound, to sing that black is beautiful in a South African way, was in fact to do a lot of political work at the same time.

Brian Balogh:

Now, while many South African musicians perform within the confines of the state owned system, Louis says some big name artists chose to resist apartheid and endured the consequences.

Louis Meintjes:

During the apartheid era, there were a lot of musicians who were either exiled or chose self-imposed exile, who are absolutely crucial to the exposure of South African culture, and with that culture as a kind of political voice internationally. These are musicians like Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba and others. And the key kind of places that these musicians went to were London or New York. And in terms of the US connection, there were American musicians who were crucial to enabling these

South African figures to integrating into a US musical life, people like Harry Belafonte and Duke Ellington for instance.

Brian Balogh:

And I know Hugh Masekela had big hits, did that matter in this effort? Was that kind of a way of validating South African musicians or did it seem a diversion or how would you describe it?

Louis Meintjes:

I think it was absolutely crucial to validating South African music and making an international world aware of South African music, and of South African music as a thoroughly modern music, you know what I mean? Hugh Masekela's 1968 hit, *Grazing in the Grass*, which was kind of an Afro fusion piece was very exciting for South Africans.

Brian Balogh:

I still turn it up today too.

Louis Meintjes:

It's great.

Brian Balogh:

Yeah, really.

Louis Meintjes:

Yeah, and that set of musicians kind of set the stage for later discussions about South African music or later exposure of South African music.

Brian Balogh:

And in the mid 1980s, in the wake of musicians like Hugh Masekela's success, South African music get an exposure from a global audience, thanks to one album in particular, Paul Simon's, *Graceland*. The similar work features a vibrant mix of pop, rock and South African styles. During its recording, Paul Simon collaborated with several South African bands, like the [inaudible 00:43:44] boys and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. It was a big commercial success and won album of the year at the Grammy's in 1987, but *Graceland*'s recording and release was engulfed in the political turmoil of the era. The album came out in 1986 while American artists were wrapped up in a cultural boycott of South Africa, implemented by the United Nations.

Louis Meintjes:

Paul Simon's entry into South Africa was really complex for a lot of people. There were a lot of people who were intrigued and interested in the creative experimentation.

Brian Balogh:

It was a big deal in the States, what was its reception in South Africa?

Louis Meintjes:

It had a most fascinating reception, it was greatly loved by many South Africans, and there were also South Africans who boycotted it. There were South Africans who felt that it was a sell out record.

Brian Balogh:

What have been the consequences on South African music of that album? I mean, in some ways it's kind of like English musicians taking African American music, redoing it and giving it back to Americans. Here are cases of Americans taking South African music and kind of remixing it and giving it back, did it have consequence on the shape of South African music.

Louis Meintjes:

It had some very immediate consequences of such a beautifully produced album, there were musicians of course who imitated the sounds, there were Isicathamiya choirs like Ladysmith Black Mambazo, other choirs like Ladysmith Black Mambazo who began singing more closer to the sound of Black Mambazo than perhaps they had been before. So they were the sort of typical kinds of influence of the great album, where all sorts of musicians were inspired by the sound and took up some of the sound into their work.

Louis Meintjes:

Another thing I think the Graceland album did was bring attention to the well known fact in South Africa of the melodic base and on the emphasis of the base in South African music. And that was largely because Paul Simon worked with this magnificent bass player Bakithi Kumalo. His baselines I think just really brought attention to baselines in a lot of South African music and the way they very often kind of the melodic lead. So there were lots of kind of musical influences, were there political influences? In the long run I think that all passes and what remains is the sound.

Brian Balogh:

So here in the 1980s, there was a lot of concern in the United States about boycotting South Africa, including a cultural boycott and a lot of anguish about what was the right thing to do. What was it like at the other end of that? What effect did the cultural boycott have in South Africa?

Louis Meintjes:

The cultural boycott was important because of the way that it raised debate about what constituted resistant culture. But of course culture can never be contained, however sophisticated a cultural policy might be, you're never able to actually contain and constrain creativity and cultural production. What was more constrained was the circulation of musicians themselves.

Brian Balogh:

And so how about South African musicians be affected by this? Did it kind of limit their opportunities as well?

Louis Meintjes:

It wasn't designed to do so, but to an extent it did. It perhaps enabled musicians who were explicitly political in their message, but there's so much music which while not explicitly political, still did important work even if it was sort of implicated in apartheid structures such as, for example, the radio, it still did important work expressing South Africans points of view and enabling them.

Brian Balogh:

Louis Meintjes is an associate professor of music at Duke University.

Joanne Freeman:

That's going to do it for us today, but you can keep the conversation going online.

Ed Ayers:

You'll find us at backstoryradio.org or send an email to backstory@virginia.edu, we're also on Facebook and Twitter @backstoryradio.

Brian Balogh:

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