The Poetics of Time and Space in Abdullah Ibrahim

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Abstract: *Time is a prominent theme in South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim's writing, discourse and music. His elaborations of time converge with ideas about place. This assumes significance, given that he was away from South Africa while developing his aesthetic, in what would later cement into exile. This paper looks at the imaginative ways in which he deploys time as a metaphor for place, both in his writing and in his music. Through a discussion of time as a theme in his discourse, the blurring of time and place in stories and memory, and finally in connecting his discourse with five sites in his music where these ideas might be read sonically, the article attends to the political commitments that inhere in Ibrahim's poetics of time and space, and suggests how resistance might be read in the imaginative elaboration of time and space in one musician's work during exile.*

Introduction[2]

Time is an enduring topic in Abdullah Ibrahim's discourse about music and the music he makes. His ideas about the organization of time often converge with his ideas about space,[3] effectively creating a sonic poetics of both. We here trace these ideas in his writings and interviews and in his contributions to the documentaries about him, and their manifestation in his music. I argue that through his discourse and sounds, Ibrahim constructs a temporal poetics akin to what Johannes Fabian would call "temporal pragmatics": "ways with time or temporal practices […] that are ultimately about politics of time".[4]

Dollar Brand – as he was then known[5] – left South Africa in 1962 to escape the apartheid laws and their increasingly harsh impact on his life and livelihood as an artist and in hopes of better opportunities in Europe and the United States. Despite achieving success abroad, he returned to South Africa from July 1968 to May 1969, when he converted to Islam and assumed the name by which he is still known, Abdullah Ibrahim. He left once more, only to return again in the early 1973, though he went into definitive exile in 1976,[6] not returning to South Africa until in 1990, when Nelson Mandela's release signalled the turn of the tide on apartheid. He remains a permanent resident of Germany today.

In the time between his arrival in New York in 1965 and his return from his first visit to his native South Africa in 1969, Ibrahim's albums attest to a marked increase in compositional activity. But they also demonstrate a reorientation from an ear trained predominantly to the examples set by American jazz towards a keener interest in (South) Africa, thematically as well as sonically. Consider, for example, the pro-

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2 I would like to express my gratitude to Christine Lucia, who gave me access to an extensive set of transcriptions of Ibrahim's compositions that she did in the 1980s. This enabled me to check my own listenings against hers as I developed my thoughts, especially in the last section. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful input.

3 I follow Michel de Certeau's definition of space as "practiced place", in other words, place that assumes significance beyond a simple understanding as a geographical marker in the way it is placed in relation to other places, itineraries, social relations and spatial practices. de Certeau 1988: 117.

4 Fabian 2007: 44.

5 In this article I will refer to him by his adopted name, Abdullah Ibrahim, as he is better known. For traceability, the references will refer to his name as it appears on the publication or album.

6 Lucia 2002: 127.

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grammatic significance given to (South) Africa in the succession of solo albums titled *Anatomy of a South African Village* (1965), *African Sketchbook* (1968), *African Piano* (released in 1970, recorded 22 October 1969). These titles reverberate with a yearning for a country and a continent that would persist throughout Ibrahim's career. This does not exclude references to American jazz musicians. Figures like Fats Waller, Ellington and Thelonious Monk are still eminently present in tracks like "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Mood Indigo" on the album *Reflections* (1965), or "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" on *Anatomy of a South African Village* (1965), and most conspicuously in the later album named after three of Ibrahim's great inspirations, *Fats Duke and Monk* (1973). After these albums, however, their noted presence gradually fades out.

Around the same time (1965 to 1970), Ibrahim's discourse in his writings and his music start to reveal a distinct preoccupation with the notions of time and geography. Svetlana Boym's point that home only becomes topical when one is absent from home, seems applicable here.[7] "Home" in displacement, however, is necessarily linked with time. Home was then, in the past, accessed through memory. The present is here, in an elsewhere, lived. Yet evoking the past, home, is not a simple matter of recalling things as they were. Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born British and American novelist, has remarked as follows on emigrants writing about his native country from afar: "[…] our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind".[8] The absence from home in the physical sense, Rushdie argues, becomes the ground for creative elaborations of home. Remembering home is therefore as much a matter of place-making as recollection. The past becomes present in the act of creative elaboration.

We posit here that in the work of Abdullah Ibrahim, time serves as the site of such creative elaboration of both home (South Africa) and his places of exile (Europe and the United States). Taking a closer look at two of his texts from the 1960s can help us trace the development of his musical engagement with time: the poetry cycle *Africa, Music and Show Business* first published in 1966,[9] and his "Talks on Jazz" produced for the Transcription Centre in London in 1965.[10] Two later documentary film portraits of him, *A Brother with Perfect Timing* (1987) and *A Struggle for Love* (2004) revisit the ideas presented in the earlier texts, suggesting that those ideas remained relevant to him for decades afterwards.[11] Collectively, these sources show his intertwined memory and (re)construction of "Africa", especially through notions of time.

The first three sections of the article trace how Ibrahim's ideas about time unfolds in his writings and discourse. The fourth section considers how senses of time play out in another modality of Ibrahim's discourse: the anecdote or story. Here, I am particularly concerned with the temporal blurring that occurs in stories and anecdotes as conduits of memory, and how memory, in the South African context, functions as a form of political resistance. The final section connects Ibrahim's ideas about time with his music, pointing to sites in his sound where these ideas might be observed. It is also a commentary and critique of the slippages between his discourse and sound, resulting in a recalibration of time as topos in his sound.

Ibrahim's Discourses on Time and Space

"They took away time and gave us a clock", Ibrahim states in the opening of the documentary film portrait, *A Brother with Perfect Timing*.[12] The differentiation between "time" and the "clock" in this statement

7 "When we are at home, we don't need talk about it. [...] When we start speaking of home and homeland, we experience the first failure of homecoming." Boym 2001: 251.

8 Rushdie 1992: 10.

9 Brand 1966: 53–7. The poetry cycle was later republished in a book of collected poetry with figures no less than Dennis Brutus and Keorapetse Kgogitsile. For reasons of accessibility, I consulted this latter version. Brand 1971: 1–11.

10 See Vos 2016: 108–157.

11 Austin 1987; Cappelari 2004.

12 Austin 1987: 00:20–00:30.

is key. Consistently across Ibrahim's discourse, the clock is presented as a regulating device, an instrument that disrupts—often violently—a perceived natural order of time. In contrast, time as metaphor for natural daily or seasonal rhythms, and timing, as the quality of being attuned to an environment,[13] are held as the ideal that is disrupted by the clock. Consider, for instance, the second poem, "slave bell", in Ibrahim's poetry cycle of 1966 (republished in 1971) titled *Africa, Music and Show Business*. This poem demonstrates Ibrahim's alignment of regulated time with coloniality, and also contests the ineluctability of time as signalled by a clock:

> slave
> master your bell
> your master
> like the cat
> was belled
> with time
> no clocks
> no clime
> stipulate
> late afternoon
> nor early mourning for the dead [...][14]

This poem constructs the clock and bell in opposition to natural cycles of day according to the position of the sun, and the archetypical cycle of life and death. But the poem does more than state an understanding of time as the site of epistemological and pragmatic contestation: in the call, "slave/master your bell", the organisation of time becomes the site of resistance and reclamation of power.

The metaphor of time spills over into the domain of space. If regulated or ordered time can be notionally connected with colonization, we may start to imagine its spatial/geographical coordinates: the global north and the global south. The idea of northern and southern hemispheres is connected respectively with the present at the time that he writes (Ibrahim's exile, first in Europe and the United Kingdom, and later in New York) and the past (South Africa). The untitled sixth poem of *Africa, Music and Show Business* is an example of how north and south are juxtaposed and contrasted throughout the poetry cycle:

> The southern spring winds
> Myself in two
> One wintered in cold steel northern city
> Brittle eyed neon guards my empty stomach
> The other
> A dimming summer
> Camera-ed in youth
> And matineed each minute of each dreary day

If summer and winter mark the stark extremities articulated as the northern and southern hemispheres, in the poem they similarly function as metaphors for passing time. The past is a memory of the more idyllic image of youthful summer, for which a fading photograph embodies that receding reality. The present, by contrast, is all too stark, represented as harsh and inhospitable.

Throughout the poetry cycle, as in this poem, the "north" is unfalteringly portrayed as an industrialized, urban space that is inimical to the African, a place where he is eternally displaced and that eventually leads to his demise. The twelfth poem of *Africa, Music and Show Business* titled "the harmonica" tells the story about the rise to popularity and ultimate demise of a harmonica player. In the final two lines of the poem, the harmonica "rattled back into the gutter where it had fallen / with the inauguration

13 Ramphalile, Manyike and Maxaulane 2023: 9.
14 "II: slave bell", in Brand 1971: 3.

of time".[15] The harmonica, staged as the instrument of the protagonist's demise, is aligned with the onset of ordered time: imposed, since it was "inaugurated". It is furthermore spatially connected with the unwholesome netherworld of urban spaces, the gutter. Time is also central in the last poem of the cycle, "Finale", which is a parable about the discovery of time in the form of "an ancient clock / ticking away in 1979¼/35½" – a preposterous time signature implying such complexity as to be comical.[16]

Exile, by implication, locks the protagonist into this stifling cycle of displacement and demise. This dim view of the displaced and creatively stunted musician is bifurcated with the intangible, elusive memory of the south, which for that very reason, also becomes a fecund terrain for imaginative elaboration. This memory only becomes available ephemerally: through the wind in the untitled sixth poem quoted above, or elsewhere through references to alcohol intoxication and stories recalled through music.

These conceptions of time and place converge more explicitly in Ibrahim's later explanation of time signatures in the 2004 documentary film *A Struggle for Love*.[17] Ibrahim aligns urban spaces with the image of the grid when he proclaims that the "four walls" of the urban (read: northern) city, which boxes people in, are musically manifest in the 4/4 time that regulates music. He contrasts this to what he considers asymmetrical time signatures prevalent in African music, 3/4, 5/4 or 7/4, which for Ibrahim signify patterns free from industrial mediation, such as those found in nature, bodily movements and spirituality. For the purposes of this reading, I am less concerned with the accuracy of such statements (which is problematic);[18] I rather want to draw attention to their paradigmatic commitments. Ibrahim seems to imply a holism in African music whereby music in an "unspoilt" form – in Ibrahim's view not subject to Western (musical) structural organisation – is attuned to natural cycles. Ibrahim's hypothesis implies that Western structures augured a fundamental rupture that estranges African musics (or by extension, African musicians) from their environment and harmony with the world.

Constructing Africa

In several respects Abdullah Ibrahim's conceptions are problematic to scholarly ears. The strong reliance on binaries in statements such as the last one, collapses Africa to a single, musically undifferentiated space; it overlooks the panoply of music practiced across an entire continent. Furthermore, the "Africa" sketched is an idealized, pre-colonial Africa, untouched by cultural contact with the west. This move does not take account of Ibrahim's own upbringing in the cosmopolitan space of Cape Town's District Six, imbued with the influences of Christian hymnody, nor the huge impact of American music heard on radio or on record. Indeed, the "traditional African" music to which Ibrahim alludes is not likely one that Ibrahim can lay claim to through extensive personal experience before leaving South Africa. Although he travelled beyond urban, cosmopolitan Cape Town and performed with some of the top black South African musicians like Kippie Moeketsi, Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, by all accounts their performances were in urban spaces and the repertoire drew heavily on bebop,[19] couched in a context of dance music steeped in

15 "XII: the harmonica" in Brand 1971: 9.

16 "Finale: life in a national park/ or – take five", in Brand 1971: 10–11.

17 Cappelari 2004.

18 Drawing on extensive fieldwork on many African musical traditions, ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik asserts otherwise. Commenting on the grouping of elementary pulsation into larger "beats", he writes: "[I]n African music, most metrical schemes combine four metrical units. Rarely is there something like 3/4 time; but there are, of course, many 12-pulse cycles, often reinterpreted by Western observers as 12/8 time." Kubik 2010: 38. Also see Anku 2000. Ibrahim seems to refer to bell patterns, also known as a timeline, prevalent in West and Central African music (largely absent in the music of southern Africa), rather than time signature. Timeline patterns are typically asymmetrical.

19 With saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, trombonist Jonas Gwangwa and trumpeter Hugh Masekela, bassist Johnny Gertze and drummer Makaya Ntshoko, Ibrahim formed The Jazz Epistles, whose album *Verse 1* (1960) was hailed as South Africa's first bebop record.

American popular songs.[20] What I suggest is that Ibrahim's ruminations on African senses of time is less the product of memory than it evinces an imaginative construction of an African musical subjectivity. The "Africa" Ibrahim creates and theorizes in exile is an Africa *in absentia*: not only to a large extent absent in his own musical experiences before he left South Africa in 1962, but also in the time place where he develops these ideas: that is, in the first decade of his exile in Europe and the United States.

Indeed, in his writing Ibrahim consistently sets up a dichotomy through which he constructs Africa in relation to the West in the sense that it is cast as the antithesis of the latter. This manifests in unregulated, non-linear concepts of time and space: non-metrical or asymmetrical time and the notion of the cycle under the banner of a return to African values – now constructed in the West's negative. Indeed, the master's tools have been seized: whereas the essentialism in postcolonial literature is most often discussed as the prerogative of the West in designating its other, Ibrahim is affecting a self-essentializing that serves as distancing mechanism from western epistemology.

Ibrahim's notion of circular or cyclical timing thus acts as a radical reclamation of what is conceived as an African ordering of sound, time, and space, or rather, sound as time/space. At its fundament, as Valentin-Yves Mudimbe reminds us, colonization means ordering or arrangement.[21] The development of accurate time and geographical measurement devices, as cultural geographer David Harvey and others have argued, were critical to the ordering enterprise that underpinned colonial and capitalist expansion.[22] In a very literal sense this ordering can be seen in the South African landscape. In the nineteenth century, William Beinart writes, the African homesteads dotting the South African pastoral interior and Zululand and the Transkei in particular, comprised circular huts built with local materials, with conical thatched roofs. "Many families arranged their huts in a semi-circle around the cattle kraal […]. Square houses, usually of mud-bricks, had appeared on mission stations and were a mark of Christianity [read: missionization, westernization] elsewhere."[23] In the latter part of the twentieth century, Jean and John Comaroff describe the white town Mafeking, as opposed to the adjacent black settlement Mafikeng, using similar terms: "Its rectangular ground plan, broad streets, and neatly fenced bungalows contrasted sharply with the sinuous paths and circular compounds of its black counterpart."[24]

From this perspective, the four walls Ibrahim considers the hallmark of the northern, industrialized city appears less fanciful: it operates as a symbol derived from the imposition of a colonial order on South African space. If we follow Ibrahim's line of argument, the ordering enterprise manifested in musical time, notably quadruple metre, can be heard in musical forms such as Christian hymnody.[25] Opposed to Ibrahim's analogy of the four walls as quadruple metre, its counterpart, the circle, could be read in the notion of the cycle. The cycle, ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik reminds us, is central to African music as it constitutes one of the three levels of inner references of African musical timing systems.[26] We will return to this idea in the final part of the article.

20 See chapter three of Ibrahim's former wife, Sathima Bea Benjamin's (auto)biography, where she describes the popular music, dance band and jazz scene in Cape Town of the 1940s and '50s. Benjamin and Muller 2011: 53–64. Also see Christopher Ballantine's definitive account of the birth of marabi (jazz) in South Africa in Ballantine 2012. David Coplan's account of South African jazz history stresses its predominantly urban setting. See Coplan 2008.

21 Mudimbe 1988: 1.

22 Harvey 1990: 424.

23 Beinart 2001: 17.

24 Comaroff and Comaroff 1987: 201.

25 Christine Lucia remarks on the influence of hymnody on Abdullah Ibrahim's music, and functional harmony as heard in the simple I – IV – V chord progressions in particular. While for Kofi Agawu, this use of tonality might mark "colonizing force" and "tonal underdevelopment" in African music, drawing attention to the violence musical missionizing visited upon local practices, Lucia stresses the creativity and agency of artists' use of this bequest when she argues that this "residue of the syntax of centuries of encounter between … hymns… and indigenous music" has become co-opted and reconstituted as it is drawn into a "gradually modernizing Africa". Similar arguments concerning metre and musical timing systems have not been made, and would be a worthwhile pursuit. See Lucia 2002: 133; Agawu 2016.

26 The others being elementary pulsation and the reference beat. Kubik 2010: 41.

Timing

If time is imbued with the politics of place, a related concept in Ibrahim's discourse, *timing*, reflects an attunement to place. The title of the 1987 documentary *A Brother with Perfect Timing* suggests both timing as an ideal, and a quality characteristic of Ibrahim. Timing demands acuity and sensory perceptivity in an environment to which the musician responds. While timing has a quotidian application and relevance, it is also a quality particularly germane to musicianship. This is illustrated in the story Brand tells to explain his notion of "perfect timing".[27] As Brand recounts, two friends are walking, in step, down the road while smoking marijuana. They become aware of a child playing in the path of an approaching car. Just before the car hits the child, one of the walkers reaches out to pull the child out of harm's way, picking her up and setting her down in a place of safety without breaking a step. In his narration, Brand stresses the rapid unfolding of these events, and the undisturbed measure of the walkers' strides even as the imminent accident registers and is subverted.

In this anecdote, time, as represented by the two walkers' casually walking in step, provides a steady pulse in which the narration unfolds. The walkers' pace is neither rushed nor directed; there is ample opportunity to absorb the spatial and social dynamics of their surroundings. No end-destination is specified; the story and its protagonists wander free from the constraints of purpose, destination, or time of arrival. The marijuana serves as a device that suggests an altered mind-state. The perception of the change in the social environment – the approaching car – leads to change or intervention. The decision of a course of action and the enactment thereof is done nearly instantaneously, yet within the imperturbable pulse of the walkers' step.

From a musical point of view, the story could be taken as an allegory for the heightened awareness ensemble playing requires of the musician, an awareness all the more crucial to the temporal unfolding of improvisation. The space of music is thereby constructed as an exceptional space: it obeys its own sense of timing outside of ordinary time. Music is (mostly) set within a consistent metre or pulse, or it deliberately plays with the absence thereof. Both improvisers and ensemble players have to be attuned to the subtle shifts in the sound dynamics between the musicians as well as their performance surroundings.[28] It has no clear purpose or particular end except the contingencies of its internal structural organisation (however strictly or loosely defined). One may go as far as suggesting that musical time operates outside of a regulated, normal time, that it creates its own pulse and temporal awareness.

Ramphalile, Manyike and Maxaulane discuss this anecdote in relation to the track "Bra Timing of Phomolong" in their article, "Echoes from Africa".[29] Mainly, they read Ibrahim's notion of timing as being attuned to the dynamics of one's social environment. More remains to be said about the *musical* understanding of timing in terms of the placement of notes within a groove or pulse, and the instantiation thereof in the track "Bra Timing" as well as Ibrahim's broader oeuvre. My reading adds to this interpretation a more careful reading of the notion of "timing" in Ibrahim's sound.

Traversing Time: Stories and Memory

Stories and anecdotes abound in Ibrahim's discursive practices: they function as conduits of ideas. Ibrahim ascribes his own learning to stories told by (or of) "the masters" and adopts the same mode of transmission in his mentorship of others.[30] In so doing, he demonstrates the centrality of the stories in

27 Ibrahim in Austin 1987.
28 Frederic Rzewski characterises improvisation as a 'wrong note' or a 'first idea' that forms the impetus for a subsequent 'recovery', which again becomes the next 'wrong note'. In this conception, improvisation might be understood as a chain of ideas and their recoveries. Rzewski 2002: 379.
29 Rhampalile et al. 2023: 7–9.
30 Anonymous n.d.

discussions and interactions between jazz musicians, affirming the "deeply social nature" of jazz and "its celebrated oral tradition".[31]

Stories and anecdotes blur senses of time in two important ways. First, in their telling and retelling, anecdotes generate a history of ideas that infuses memory with present elaborations. As much as memories could be understood as recollections of stories or lived experiences, they are also the canvases onto which current concerns are projected through the act of narration. As such, they are constructions as well as reconstructions of history, place and time, dependent on a social context that conditions their significance. Second, Tony Whyton notes that while "anecdotal accounts are almost always constructed in retrospect, [...] their narrative is capable of giving the recipient the sense of experiencing an event in the present. In this sense, an event that happened fifty years ago can be recounted as if it just happened yesterday." Thus, anecdotes "[confuse] the relationship between past and present".[32] In other words, the anecdote conflates the past and present by infusing the past with present interests and concerns, and bringing the past closer to the (narrated) present so as to elide the temporal distance between then and now.

Ibrahim's untitled seventh poem in *Africa, Music and Show Business* vividly captures this porosity of times and spaces embroiled in processes of remembering:

> the night my soul had herringed red
> through raucous songs of childhood:
> and friends and comic stories long forgotten
> were whiskied out of memories dim
> to function as narcotic
> and silence cruel reality as it screamed
> it's neither here nor there[33]

This poem reflects how memory conflates time, recalling Edward Said's description of exile as "contrapuntal" created through an awareness of at least two cultures, settings, or homes.[34] Then, there is made present, here, but also remains painfully absent or out of reach.

Memory and remembrance serve another important function in Ibrahim's exile. Overt political references in Ibrahim's music emerge not so much from articulations of protest (as it does, for instance, in Miriam Makeba's song lyrics such as "Oppas Verwoerd")[35] as through musical rituals mourning lost places and communities – through memory and remembrance. In this sense, memory could be understood as a form of resistance – a refusal to forget. The effect of Ibrahim's music, drawing on and triggering in turn memory of soundscapes in South Africa held as ideal – particularly those of District Six – served as a soundtrack to resistance against apartheid.[36]

Interestingly, apartheid is seldom invoked by name in Ibrahim's musical, spoken, or written discourse. The dominant discourse against which it protests is more that of colonialism and less specifically apartheid. Apartheid, however, could be regarded as part of the trajectory of colonialism that Ibrahim musically includes in its fold. One of the forms of violence that colonialism (including apartheid) wrought was the alienation of peoples from their histories. It manifests, amongst other means, in favouring written histories over oral histories, as Ngũgĩ powerfully argues.[37] More specific to the community in which Ibrahim grew up, amnesia is read in the assimilationism Mohamed Adhikari considers one of the central impulses of "coloured identity"

31 Whyton 2010: 107.
32 Whyton 2010: 108–9.
33 Untitled seventh poem in k1971: 6.
34 Said 2000: 186.
35 Translated as "Beware Verwoerd!", referring to South Africa's former Prime Minister, also widely known as the architect of apartheid. Verwoerd was assassinated in the South African House of Assembly on 6 September 1966.
36 Mason 2007: 26; Lucia 2002: 128–9.
37 Ngũgĩ 1998: 108.

(in the sense that this category was historically conceived by the apartheid state, denoting those who were neither of African nor European descent), that looked especially to the dominant (read: white) society in its aspirations for acceptance.[38] Nothing could therefore be more subversive than connecting with an African, precolonial lineage through a conscious research and re-imagination of obscured histories. Against this background, the assertion of pride in memory and an active interest in history emerge as acts of activism.

Music is a particularly potent tool in uncovering this history, as is suggested in this anecdote Ibrahim tells in *A Brother with Perfect Timing*:

> When we came to the States, it must have been in ’65 or ’66; someone gave us an album of […] Khoisan music, recorded on this Library of Congress folk music series, right. And this was recorded on location in the Kalahari. And there, on one of the tracks, they play a *ramkiekie* [a three-stringed lute] and rattles or shakers. There was [Ibrahim starts singing the same tune as the *moppie*[39] he remembers from childhood, “Gooi die pannekoek in die pan/ Daar kom Galiema aan”]. And there was exactly the same song. So there are these layers and layers of colonialism. Of colonial darkness and ignorance. Ignorance that has taken us away from the reality and the truth of the music. And of our history. And it is absolutely [through] music that it is beginning to be unveiled.[40]

Music, in this quote, functions as an archaeological site through which an unwritten past can be excavated. Music enables these ties to be picked up in a way that written record does not, as references to “colonial ignorance” imply. But it also makes possible a creative elaboration, an imaginative treatment of an erased or marginalized history that affords the possibility to make the story one’s own. It is therefore through music that a hidden history can be excavated, salvaged from the obscurity into which the Khoisan heritage had evidently lapsed for Ibrahim (and probably many others in the Cape “coloured” community), and it is in this remembrance – bringing history into the present – that music’s restorative nature lies, and its power to shape the future. This process, according to Ibrahim, fixes the “broken timeline” between past, present, and future.[41]

Sites of Time in Ibrahim’s Sound

So far, we have traced the ways in which time manifests in Ibrahim’s verbal and written discourse, mapping how his poetics of time invoke senses of space. But how do these ideas translate to Ibrahim’s sound? Taking the discourses outlined above as prompts, this section connects Ibrahim’s discourse with his sound, locating sites where Ibrahim’s poetics of time might be read in his music. This is not intended as an exhaustive discussion of time/timing in Ibrahim’s music, but as an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of Ibrahim’s discourse as interpretive frame for his sound.

The first site, as Ibrahim himself suggests, is time signature. A clear example of Ibrahim’s discourse put in musical practice is “Bra Joe of Kilimanjaro”, an early work that has remained a staple in Ibrahim’s setlists. It is in 5/4 time, an asymmetrical time signature that directly demonstrates the thwarting of 4/4 time connoting the “four walls” of the city, which we may recall function as a metaphor for coloniality. The use of irregular metre is, however, not a feature as often encountered in Ibrahim’s work as his discourse might suggest. In fact, much of his oeuvre is in simple quadruple or duple metre. A literal reading of Ibrahim’s statement in relation to his sound does not serve Ibrahim’s discursive intentions well. Following the spirit of Ibrahim’s word rather than the letter, one might notice how his earlier work strains against regular metre. Listen, for instance, to “Jabulani – Easter Joy” or “Sunset in Blue”, which

38 Adhikari 2005: vii.
39 A moppie is a comic song type popular in the Klopse and Malay choir traditions of Cape Town. See Martin 2013: 112–3.
40 Ibrahim in Austin 1987.
41 Ibrahim in Austin 1987.

pushes and pulls against quadruple metre, or to "The Aloe and the Wild Rose", "Machopi" or "Zikr (Remembrance of Allah)", where regular metre is avoided altogether.

Figure 1: "Bra Joe of Kilimanjaro", short cycle pattern in the left hand, which repeats throughout the composition. Transcription by the author.

"Bra Joe from Kilimanjaro" also suggests a second site for reading Ibrahim's poetics of time: that of form, or, how music unfolds in time. "Bra Joe" features a short ostinato pattern in the bass line (played by left hand of the piano), a feature of many African music traditions that Gerhard Kubik calls the 'short cycle'.[42] We might recall that in Ibrahim's discourse, natural cycles of time maps onto notions of 'the south' (read: Africa), as opposed to imposed orders of time connoting 'the north', coloniality and modernity. The short cycle could thus be read as a musical instantiation of 'the south'.

The use of the short cycle principle is much more common in Ibrahim's work than irregular metre. Examples include "Namhlanje", "Ntsikana's Bell", "Tintinyana", "Sunset in Blue", and "Zimbabwe". The short cycle also features in tracks based on the *marabi*-pattern (I-IV-I$^{6/4}$-V-I). This is an early form of jazz in South Africa that has been likened to the blues, in that it has become one of the mainstays of a distinctly South African jazz sound.[43] Examples in Ibrahim's work includes the well-known tracks "Mannenberg" and what I often think of as its reprise, "Soweto", as well as "Woza Mntwana", "Xaba" or "Maraba Blue", to name a few examples. Figure 2 shows how the *marabi* pattern functions in "Mannenberg", where it is repeated twice for the melodic theme to be completed.[44] These cycles on which the piece is based, are repeated throughout the track.

Figure 2: First phrase from "Mannenberg"[45] as an example of the short cycle as formal principle. Transcription by the author.

The third site refers to Ibrahim's notion of *timing*. This is a more opaque signifier than time as conceived through the notion of the cycle or time signatures. Ibrahim's notion of timing conveyed through the story of the two friends walking in step, rehearses one understanding of timing: a concept concerned with placement within a steady metre or pulse. Again, taken literally Ibrahim's discourse anticipates that in his music the placement of notes within metre would be highly distinctive. Yet Ibrahim's placement is surprisingly 'on time', as opposed to the kind of latency that is heard in an artist like Miles Davis. In his

42 Kubik 2010: 41.
43 Ballantine 2012: 33–38.
44 In 'Soweto', there is a brief 4-bar coda that functions as the 'turnaround' to the head, which briefly breaks away from the marabi short-cycle pattern.
45 The recording I refer to is from the album *Mannenberg* –' is where it's happening' (1974) available: https://youtu.be/-irE1AEH8Qg?si=Q8z7xiecMv7I1gTR [accessed 4 September 2025].

discussion of time in jazz, Mark Doffman helpfully distinguishes between playing *in* time, which refers to players' ability to achieve "stability and consistency in their placement of notes", as opposed to playing *with* time, which he describes as the "expressive, perhaps playful, shaping of rhythm that adds communicative value to a performance".[46] In my listening, timing in Ibrahim has to do with the latter. This includes, for instance, disrupting a sense of metre; or Ibrahim's minimalistic approach to sound that creates a sonic spaciousness in which accents, harmony, dissonance, and embellishment become all the more poignant because of the relative sparseness of the material.

An example that invites a reading of timing is "Bra Timing from Phomolong".[47] The opening of the track plays with time in going from straight to swing feel, with the use of accents further disrupting clear senses of time. The first two bars start with a straight feel in the first statement of the piano groove (see Figure 3, bars 1 and 2). In the second repetition of the groove (bars 3-4), the right-hand harmonization is slightly swung, this new interpretation of the groove emphasized by the accent on the second quaver of beat 2, throwing the listener's initial sense of metre off-kilter. By the third repetition onwards (bar 5), the music has a clear swing feel, and the sense of 4/4 metre has returned. But as the horns enter, the play with accents and the resultant rhythm created between the horns, piano, and drums again thickens.

Figure 3: Opening bars of "Bra Timing from Phomolong". Transcription by the author.

46 Doffman 2019: 164.
47 The version I refer to is on the album *Ekaya* (1984), available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH_uY4UQybc&list=RDMMfH_uY4UQybc&start_radio=1 [accessed 4 September 2025].

Often, Ibrahim's (dis)placement of accents within metre is intricately connected with the harmony and voicing. Consider, for instance, the harmonization of the accented chord labelled 'A' in Figure 3 as a triad in the right hand, followed by the chord labelled 'B', harmonized as a dyad in the right hand, which, together with the left hand, forms a quartal triad, creating a more open, 'spacious' sound. Here, there is a thicker harmonic texture that gives more punch to the accented beat. The sparser texture on the unaccented beat further emphasizes the accent already heard in the previous chord's difference in volume and attack. It is worth mentioning that Ibrahim's voicings remain remarkably stable across different recordings of a particular work. The voicings of these particular chords, in other words, are not accidental.

These plays with asymmetry and accent are admittedly subtle; they hardly register as radical interventions into time/timing in a spectrum of jazz practices. Yet the simplicity of the construction of "Bra Timing" (and many other compositions by Ibrahim) amplifies the impact of gestures such as these.[48] The minimalistic quality of other aspects like harmony, melody, rhythm, and even instrumentation renders aspects like voicing and accent all the more conspicuous. Read against the discursive importance Ibrahim accords time, these expressions of time and timing in his music assume heightened significance. What Ibrahim's musical approach to timing suggests is not just an attunement to other musicians within a matrix of time as metaphor of sociality, as Ramphalile, Manyike and Maxaulane suggest.[49] It rather suggests time unmoored from ineluctability. It is not only as a contestation of time as conceived in a strictured sense, but an assertion of flexibility, of the type of playfulness with time arguably born of the ambiguity of being 'hemisphered', being in two places and two senses of time (past and present) at once that Ibrahim refers to in his sixth poem.

The final site where I read senses of time is timbre. I give one example to demonstrate how different senses time might be instantiated through timbre, although I could give many. In "Blues for a Hip King", the electric piano's vibrato coupled with the hymn-like harmonization of the melody, is reminiscent of a church organ using vibrato. It is significant that Ibrahim's mother played piano for the American Methodist Episcopal Church in Cape Town, and that the chordal-style harmonization often heard in his music is more than just the invocation of a style; it is also an invocation of a place – that of his youth – and, by extension, of memory.[50] There is a heavy reverb in Basil Coetzee's saxophone, giving it a distal quality of a melody heard from afar. Coetzee's timbre and use of portamento as he slides into certain melodic notes, strikes me as similarly evocative of the sound of the *Kaapse klopse* and Christmas bands – sounds iconic of Cape Town, of home, of a past recollected.[51] Contrast this to the relative presence of the drum. Together, these sounds compress two senses of time: the present moment of listening, and that evocative space of memory. Other examples of tracks where timbre produces a similarly evocative senses of time is the use of the tack-piano in "Mannenberg" (as on the eponymous album, *Mannenberg – 'is where it's happening'*, 1974) or "Gwidza" (*Underground in Africa*, 1974).

Hearing time in Abdullah Ibrahim is hearing place. The sonic sites to which I connected Ibrahim's discourse show that his pronouncements are indeed useful as a heuristic, but not necessarily in the

48 Although the scope of this article does not permit further elaboration, it is worth pointing out the influence of Zen in Ibrahim's minimalistic approach to musical material. Ibrahim is a long-time practitioner of Zen and martial arts. This aspect of Ibrahim's spirituality and aesthetic is invoked in the opening moments of the documentary A Struggle for love (Cappelari 2004), where Ibrahim practices tai chi on Table Mountain, an iconic landmark in Cape Town. In this gesture, he enmeshes Zen (a spiritual centre) with his place of birth, itself a complex meeting point between Ibrahim's African roots as invoked through his references to Khoi and San heritage; Cape Town as urban port city that fostered connections between American jazz and its localization in South Africa; and the Sufi branch of Islam (a survival of slaves brought to the Cape from the Dutch East Indies), to which Ibrahim converts in 1968.

49 Ramphalile et al. 2023: 7–9.

50 Lucia 2002: 133.

51 For aural reference, listen to the St Joseph's Christmas band playing the hymn 'Die here regeer' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhk5naQmxPQ&list=RDjhk5naQmxPQ&start_radio=1) or this short video capturing the typical sounds of the klopse parade (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elsiITKPm1Q). One of the most direct invocations of this sound and musical structure in Ibrahim's recorded oeuvre is the track 'African Marketplace', as recorded on the eponymous album of 1980.

ways Ibrahim states. Ibrahim's discourse is more explicit and categorical than the sonic manifestations of his ideas that I traced in his music. One obvious conclusion might be that music signifies in a much more ambiguous way than language. But I would argue that there is more to the matter than this. Ibrahim's discourse draws our attention to the paradigmatic commitments of musical gestures in his works. To put this diferrently, Ibrahim's discourse heightens the significance of subtle gestures. I find Svetlana Boym's notion of diasporic intimacy helpful to unlock what is happening here.[52] Ibrahim's music *intimates* rather than states. It hints at a closeness, an intimacy, with home that is in question, absent, diasporic. Mindful of Boym's earlier quote that home becomes perceptible when it is absent, I would argue that Ibrahim's music performs this diasporic awareness: not always or necessarily through direct invocation, but also through gestures subtly coded as mnemonics, reminders of home.

Conclusion

This article considered poetics of time and space in Ibrahim's writings and sound. It recalls de Certeau's conception of narrative in his essay "Spatial Stories", in which he posits that *narrating* place is a means of *constructing* place.[53] As much as "home" as narrated by Ibrahim is informed by memory, it is also constructed through discovery (e.g. listening to the Khoisan field recordings) and imaginatively elaborated. In these elaborations, Ibrahim is concerned with no less than the reclamation of an African epistemology. If colonization is understood as an epistemological imposition of order through the metric of time, rendering it "bounded, determinate, and therefore […] countable",[54] Ibrahim's reclamation consists of the construction of an alternative epistemology, yet its tenets reach deeply into the recesses of ontology: hearkening to an African way of life, an African way with time, salvaging indigenous identity.

Another aspect of home as imagined in Ibrahim's discourse and music, is that it is an idealized space. Benedict Anderson writes that "[a]ll profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives".[55] Ibrahim's constructions of Africa in exile, through his musical thought and poetry, have as much to do with what memory has elided as what it recalls. The very partiality of memory, its elisions, serves the creative act. As Rushdie reflects on his experience of exile: "The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities."[56]

I would argue that the elision is crucial in another way: for opening space in which an imaginative construction of "Africa" becomes possible. Being unmoored from the embeddedness in traditions, communities and politics of a localized practice in Africa, seems, in the case of Ibrahim, conducive to assembling fragments differently. In this new assemblage, the recognisability of the remains gives the music poignancy. And arguably, this "Africa" assembled differently makes Ibrahim's music such a powerful vector for senses of a recovered history braided into alternative visions of, and hopes for, another South Africa.

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