

Houses on Fire: The Hauntologies of Sankomota

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Abstract

The following essay is part of a body of work titled *Signal to Noise: sound and fury in (post)apartheid South Africa*. These are a collection of creative non-fiction essays set against the backdrop of my involvement with a small, independent mobile recording studio based in Johannesburg between 1983 and 1997. The metaphor of a drowning signal, pushing through and making itself heard above the noise, resonates throughout the collection. The complexities of the political versus artistic nature of what we were involved with provide a setting for an anecdotal approach to what is part history, part biography, part memoir and part theoretical sonic exploration. The following essay falls into this approach and is constructed from memories enhanced by diaries, scrapbooks, shards of notes, lyrics, photos and conversations. These have been employed in reconstructing a narrative arc that covers the recording of the first album made by the band Sankomota, who were banned from entry into South Africa and were based in Maseru, mostly playing to audiences at one of the leading hotels. Sankomota, then called Uhuru, experienced extraordinary, almost metaphysical, peaks and troughs throughout their nearly thirty-year existence hence the hauntological device in the title. The record was also the first made in our fledgling mobile studio using newly affordable equipment that kickstarted many such do-it-yourself projects worldwide. This was the first in a steady stream of technologies that would eventually break the hegemony of mainstream record companies. In apartheid South Africa, this was hugely significant, as being able to sideline the censorship of state-owned media enterprises meant immense freedom in the kind of projects one came to consider. Savage incidents of force and brutality were still common then, and our small venture has to be seen in the context of broader unrest and suffering. Frank Leepa was an uncompromising survivor. His words and melodies still move and inspire a younger generation.

Keywords

Sankomota, Shifty Records, Afro rock, Lesotho raids, (post)apartheid music, South African cultural history, Kalahari Surfers, Frank Leepa, mobile studios, African hauntology, afrofuturism.

Lucas was tense, and I saw a tear roll down his cheek. He then took some newspapers and, without explanation, set our home alight. The house caught fire quickly, and through the window, I saw the beautiful roses on the wallpaper scorch and burn out one by one.¹

– Gladys Thomas

‘Babulala umuzi ka baba’ (They’re killing the houses of my father)²

– Moses Mchunu

The Soundman (6.10 pm, Friday, 11 March 1983)

After a long day as part of a crew working on a documentary film in Lesotho, he unlocks the door of his hotel room in the Holiday Inn, Maseru, staggers in and offloads his equipment onto the double-bed. He unpacks the recorder, laces up a spool of magnetic tape and, threading it through the heads, pulls it around the pinch rollers. The machine is hired, but it still feels like an old reliable friend with its sturdy aluminium chassis and familiar controls. He connects the headphones and fast-forwards over the one-kilohertz reference tone a minute or so into the take.

‘I’m in the Maluti mountains of Lesotho, and over here are the angora goats, bred for their beautiful soft fleece ... I’m sorry ... cut! Let me try that again.’

There is a sharp beep and a tape flutter, a dive into silence for a few seconds, and then his own voice.

‘Sound rolling.’

‘Quiet, please,’ says the director to the kids gathering around.

‘And roll camera.’

‘Camera rolling,’ says the cameraman.

‘Mohair, day one, scene two, take two,’ the director announces and hits the clapper board onto its metal rim.

The little needle on his recorder shoots into the red and slowly recedes. The clapper board provides an audio and visual cue to the arduous task of synchronisation and film sound post-production, something he stays clear of.

‘I’m here in the ...’ He fast forwards across the tape-heads with a gurgling, turkey-gobble sound through to the following reference tone in the middle of the tape and checks another take.

He is happy with the sound, listening behind the voice, into the far distance, to the goats and village voices, to the birds and the light wind in the trees, a little sonic window into another world.

‘Sounds good,’ he thinks.

1 G. Thomas, ‘The Rose Patterned Wallpaper’, *Staffrider*, 4, 2, July/August 1981.

2 M. Mchunu, ‘Babulala Umuzi Ka Baba’ (Track 1, BL320, LP, Gallo, 1981).

He pulls on a fresh cotton shirt and, stashing the gear beneath his bed, leaves his room. He heads down the passage, his sneakers squeaking on the well-polished vinyl floors. He pushes through the heavy swing doors, walks out into the sunshine, and onto a grassy enclosure – the beer garden.

A band plays as he threads his way to the crew's table. The filming had gone well today, and there is much banter and laughter, and, by the looks of things, a pretty good head-start has been made on beer consumption. He goes to the bar as the band begins a reggae groove. It has an infectious looping bass line, and the singer has an afro-punk attitude. Unexpectedly modern for a small place like this. They are a four-piece outfit crammed onto the small, slightly rickety stage. It looks like thick boards have been laid across a flotilla of plastic beer crates.

'Pretty good sound,' he says to the barman after ordering a beer.

'Yes,' comes the reply.

He asks who they are and what the song is about.

'They are called Uhuru. They are the best band in Maseru. They are singing in Sesotho, but the song is from our folklore, quite difficult to describe.'

'Please try. I'm very interested.' He moves in closer to listen. The barman continues: 'It is a riddle which is a tradition in our language. It is a child saying to an old man, 'You say you don't drink water, but there is mud on your knees; where did you get it then?' And so he answers, 'Times have been hard; I have been in the rain.' It borrows from a traditional story told by a rabbit, but they adapt it now for their song. They are very clever, these guys, very clever.'

It's a beautiful song description, and he suddenly feels embarrassed to be a South African. Only three months before his arrival in Maseru, South African commandos launched a pre-dawn raid into the city, killing 42 people.³ 'The whole world hates us for this shit.' He thinks, 'We are pariahs.'

The singer says, 'This song is called House on Fire, and it is inspired by the events of Christmas last year.'

The lyrics are a mixture of English and Sesotho: 'who set the house alight – house on fire – somebody said get up and leave – house on fire.'

He suddenly is reminded of his own house and asks the barman for some coins.

'I have to make a quick call,' he says and walks over to the payphone. He dials a number. It rings five times and is answered.

'Jackie? Hi, it's Lloyd. Howzit going?'

'Oh, hi. That was lucky; I've only just got in,' she says.

'I suddenly got worried that the house was empty and wondered if you had got back. Also, the dog's food is running low,' he says.

'She's fine. I set off the studio alarm by accident and had to deal with a bunch of burly guys in combat uniform, but it's all sorted out,' she says.

3 Their target was a cluster of houses on the outskirts of Maseru where members of the African National Congress (ANC) were believed to be in hiding. Meeting no opposition from Lesotho's tiny 2000-man paramilitary force, they blasted their way through numerous homes. By morning 42 people were dead, 30 of them believed to be members of the ANC. The remaining victims were Lesotho residents, including five women and two children.

‘Ok cool. I’m at the Holiday Inn now, watching a band called Uhuru. They’re really good. Have you heard of them?’ Jackie works as a teacher and lives on and off between Maseru and the Concordia house on the outskirts of Johannesburg, where his studio is located.

‘Oh yes, that’s Frank Leepa’s band – they’re great guys, stuck in Maseru since their entrance visas to South Africa were revoked. Not surprising. They played in Jo’burg a couple of years ago, and Black Jesus, their percussionist, kept yelling at the audience about killing whites and sending them back into the sea. Not a great career move. It didn’t take long for the cops to come down heavily on them. Sent them back to Lesotho and endorsed their passports. They couldn’t even finish their tour. Messed up their chances of getting a record deal as well.’

After the call, he watches the rest of the band’s set and introduces himself.⁴

Murmurs, witches and riddles⁵

Frank Moki Leepa, leader and songwriter for the band Sankomota, succumbed to lobar pneumonia and passed away on 27 November 2003. His modest celebrity status has consequently given rise to a swell of sustained, and even academic, interest in his work. His life’s journey and the road to eventual musical success had been complex and fraught with riddles, rumours and misfortune. This essay will attempt to curate the disparate events and reports leading up to and around the recording of his first album in 1983.

I heard the call
wake up
Got up – took my shield and spear
I met Sankomota
Moonshine
Whisper! Whisper! In the night
It’s twelve midnight
So who set the house alight – house on fire
Somebody says, somebody says get out!
The witches are on the way
house on fire

In a 2011 Mahala magazine article titled ‘One on One | An Ode To Sankomota’, Tseliso Monaheng wrote, ‘The history of Sankomota is as long-winded as it is interesting; it is a dense tale punctuated by varying degrees of bad timing, terrible decisions and bad luck.’

4 This section is based on a discussion I had with Lloyd Ross in 2020 in Kommetjie, Cape Town. He told me the story of how he first came across the band Sankomota whilst working on a Mohair documentary.

5 Translated from the Sesotho: Ho korotla, baloi le lilotho.

To entertain ideas of ‘bad timing’ or ‘bad luck’, a door to the metaphysical has to be opened and through it a host of possible explanations and actions allowed. I think that the way Leepa dealt with this bad luck was through his songwriting. By songwriting I mean the interplay of words, music and melody through a deep introspection of the concerned thematic. An atmospheric or attitudinal aura is also a key ingredient to a song but not something that is easily quantified. Many of Leepa’s songs were an exploration within the deep well of his own creative psyche, an exorcism of sorts; but not a driving-out, more a harnessing of the negative, the bad luck – as we’ve named it – to a progressive forward-moving force. This was key, I believe, to his charisma and his wider popularity. Lloyd Ross, who produced that first album and whose destiny paired with Leepa’s for a few years, also acknowledged the feckly ghost-like hand of fate in the band’s trajectory.

Tragedy stalked the various permutations of the band. Of the original Sankomota that I recorded, there are no surviving members. Moss Nkofu succumbed to an illness in Lesotho, while Maruti Selati fell off a building in London. All of the newer Sankomota members, apart from Frank Leepa and Tsepo Tshola, were killed in one tragic accident. While on tour, the jam-packed minibus taxi that they were travelling in did a u-turn in front of an oncoming 18-wheeler on the N1.⁶

In 2001, five years after the mini-bus accident, Leepa released one of his most poignant songs ever. ‘Another Accident’ appeared on the final Sankomota album, *Frankly Speaking*, and is strongly indicative of my comments above. The lyric sets out the scenario of a tragedy involving school children in a taxi which jolts the songwriter to remember his own earlier and similar experience (possibly the crash of 1996).

I know cos I’ve been there before
I’ve seen it all before
From afar I can hear the children
screaming in the taxi
(call the ambulance – another accident)
Taxi burning
Burning
On a day like this.⁷

The *Frankly Speaking* album appeared after eight years of little activity for the band and was their last studio album. An impossibly difficult album to find, it seemed to float past the public eye and straight into obscurity. It did, however, provide vocalist Tsepo Tshola with the impetus to launch his solo career, which, from 2002 onwards, propelled him to superstar status. His death in July 2021 from Covid 19

6 Lloyd Ross writing in a Shifty communique mailshot, 2009.

7 The full song can be heard here: <https://youtube/-G-wBpBGDX8>.

related complications brought an uncanny resolution to the diversity of the band's misfortunes. Tshola himself was smitten with the loss of his wife to a serial killer during the early days of the band.⁸

Like many Sesotho speakers, Monaheng acknowledged the patriotic pride that many feel when hearing Leepa's songs. Pehello Mofokeng goes deeply into Leepa's usage of Sesotho folklore riddles and wordplay in his lyrics. This essay will use Mofokeng's analysis as a springboard to bounce related ideas imbued with 'prophetic message projected to our future, with nostalgic sound ...'⁹

From the blog of Peter Schneider, self-acknowledged 'Founder and First Manager of the band Uhuru'

When I arrived in the tiny country of Lesotho in Southern Africa in 1975, I immediately started to look around for a local band ... I went to every club in Maseru where there were bands playing (not many!) and soon found the most amazing guitar player. His name was Frank Leepa. I just stood awed in the crowd watching this young genius playing with amazing grace and making it look so easy! At about the same time, and by a miracle I must say, a certain 'Black Jesus' had returned to Lesotho after having certain 'problems' in Germany where he had been living for many years. Black Jesus ... spoke fluent German (as I do) and [...] we became very good friends. We both decided that it was time to form a local band and that this band would be the BEST EVER and would be the pride and glory of all the Basotho people. We asked Frank who was the BEST drummer in town and he suggested MOSS NKOFE. Finding a singer was the most difficult part. One night I heard TSHEPO TSHOLA and immediately fell in love with his voice. It had to be him! [...]. This was the first formation of UHURU.¹⁰

A network of wires (Johannesburg, October 1983)

A tiny hissing sound accompanies the lemony smell of the solder melting on the hot tip of the iron as it melds a hair-fine wire to the stainless steel plug. The grey alloy is like soft lead and very satisfying to use; its transformation from solid to liquid happens in little globules of perfect silver, which appear at the instant that the correct temperature is reached. The plugs and cables are the arteries of the studio; they spread rhizomically throughout the structure, connecting guitars to amplifiers, amplifiers to speakers, microphones to mixers, mixers to tape machines and tape machines to effect-processors. They have names like Jack, Cannon, Banana, XLR,

8 This terrible story is told by Cathy Ingram in her blog profile of Tshola: <https://sankomota-uhuru.ls/uhuru-band-members-by-cathy-ingram/>. In trying to find out more I came across this blog by journalist and media personality Nthakoana 'Queen Mosia' Ngatane which verifies the story: <https://nthakoana.wordpress.com/2021/07/16/about-tsepo-ntate-tshola/>.

9 P. Mofokeng, *Sankomota: An Ode in One Album: A Reflective Essay* (Johannesburg: Geko Publishing, 2018), 96.

10 This quote is verbatim from Schneider's blog wherein he talks about his arrival to work at his father's laundromat in Maseru and chronologises the entire history of the band before Lloyd Ross met them. I will use this blog a few more times: <https://sankomota-uhuru.ls/sankomota-uhuru-by-peter-schneider/>.

RCA and MIDI, and creep across the floors, some hidden and some visible. Some are balanced and contain a third wire – the earth – and are often enclosed with a buzz-protecting wire mesh surrounding them, and some are unbalanced simple two-wire cables. The *female* plugs are built into patch bays and soldered to hidden cables which connect to the equipment. They receive the *male* plugs connecting the various technologies in a series of inputs and outputs, an orgy of electronic pulses all striving to deliver their signals above the noise floor: the equipment universe's ever-present, aggregate acceptable hum. The war against noise saw them all jacketed in protective mesh or foil screens, shields against noise interference. The sounds and impulses of sound move through these cable rhizomes, some sending electrical pulses to the coil in the machine's record head, setting up a tiny magnetic field.

In contrast, others supply current to the motor feeding the tape onto rollers. These pull the tape through the magnetic field, aligning the particles in proportion to the strength of the field. The loudness and pitch of the sound make the magnetic particles align in different patterns as the tape passes through, imprinting the information into the iron oxide covering.¹¹

The network of wires and cables, neatly hidden in plastic tubes behind wooden panels, are buried from view and connect the two tape machines, mixing desk and all the effects to each other. They also connect to a thick, long multi-core cable (the Snake) which ends in female Cannon XLR plugs.¹² These are where microphones and instruments connect from outside the control room. The cable can be rolled out onto a stage or into a room and connected up to a band's outboard equipment and, within an hour or two, be ready to record.

Kinetic force

During the early 1980s, two rock musicians, Ivan Kadey and Lloyd Ross, struck up a partnership, pooled their resources and set about creating an environment to record music that interested them and fell within a specific outsider/political aesthetic. Kadey's band, National Wake, had broken up after three years of successful tours and concerts. The continual police harassment due to having three black members and playing a politically charged and attitudinal synthesis of reggae and punk-rock made it impossible to function. Before going their separate ways, they released a self-financed album recorded during downtime at one of Johannesburg's major-label studios.¹³ The Kadey/Ross project began as a way to document similar bands by providing an affordable recording set-up that embraced both the political and the do-it-yourself punk ethic. Initially set up in Kadey's house, where the two recorded a few songs, the broader concept involved working with various post-punk and African-fusion artists. Ross, whose restless energy and unstoppable can-do optimism had

11 Source material: <https://theconversation.com/curious-kids-how-does-music-get-onto-a-cassette-tape-165759>.

12 XLR is an acronym invented by the Cannon company for their X labelled balanced cables with Locking (L) and rubber insulation (R).

13 Merriam Webster define the word *label* as: 'a company that produces music recordings. *Major-label* refers to one of the 'Big' record labels that annually sell a high percentage of their recordings, and can distribute, market and publish their own content.

something of wanderlust flowing through his veins, came up with the mobile studio idea that appealed to his two main passions: music and travel.

The nomadic studio concept took shape in Ross' mind more clearly after he'd read a magazine article about the Rolling Stones mobile studio (RSM) and how it was used to record not only two of their best studio albums but a slew of rock classics. By pulling the RSM up to a country manor house, or a chateau in France, the Stones could work with a freedom unknown in an industry controlled by accountants and studio bureaucrats. They could work when they liked and where they liked and not worry about the ticking hourly rate or necessary narcotic consumption.

The last person to leap from the burning casino (4th of December 1971)

What captured Ross' imagination was the quite well-known story of the rock band Deep Purple and their 1971 trip with the mobile studio to the city of Montreux in the Swiss Alps. They intended to record a new album in the theatre of the *Montreux Casino* which was closed down for the winter months and would therefore be immune to neighbourly attention.

The Deep Purple mobile project included an important unplanned event, which first thwarted and then helped shape the form and content of what was to become their most successful record. Released in 1972, the *Machine Head* album hit the charts in the wake of its popular single, *Smoke on the Water*. The song had an unusual lyric narrative that seemed to capture the public's imagination through its combination with, what is probably the most famous rock-guitar riff ever, is what made it a worldwide perennial hit. The song is a chronology of the events leading to the burning down of the casino where they were to work. On the night of the 4th of December 1971, towards the end of a concert by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, a Czechoslovakian immigrant fired a flare gun into the rattan ceiling, causing a massive flash fire. After some initial confusion – the fire doors had all been chained closed – the 2000-strong audience mainly escaped unharmed. Peter Schneider, the co-founder of the Uhuru/Sankomota project, was in that audience and claimed to have been the last person to leave the burning building; the house on fire strangely anticipated his involvement with the song of the same name a decade later.

From the blog of Peter Schneider

I had taken a strong dose of an illicit drug and [...] I thought that the fire was part of the show. (Because Frank [Zappa] had such a crazy reputation, I and many other fans too, thought that anything could happen at one of his shows!) [...] The fire spread so quickly that all the people in the front were trapped ... I stood behind the crowd who were trying to get out through the LARGE GLASS WINDOWS which covered the whole of the front of the building from one side to the other. I owe my life to a SWISS FIREMAN who came in with a huge axe and started to break the windows one by one, starting from the left towards the stage ... The building was on the second

floor, or at least half a floor up, so it was quite a jump. Before the glass was broken it was getting difficult to breathe, the oxygen in the room was rapidly being consumed by the flames. Once the windows were broken the air came in and the flames jumped up and headed straight towards us. I WAS THE LAST PERSON OUT.¹⁴ (sic: Schneider's capitals)

There is a bootleg recording of the entire Zappa concert, including him shouting 'Fire' in the middle of their last song, about one hour and twenty minutes in.¹⁵

The name changer (September 1983)

Twelve years after the Montreux Casino fire, Kadey and Ross began a project to fit state-of-the-art recording technology into a second-hand 1970s *Sprite Musketeer* caravan, which they parked in a friend's driveway. Ross had found it in a newspaper ad. It was a plump, off-white oval-shaped vehicle and, with a band of blue separating it into two halves, slightly resembled a hamburger with a blue patty in the middle. The wheels were tiny, like two little raisins beneath the bun, but it was sturdy, roadworthy, and strangely spacious inside. Kadey's design sense and architectural knowledge helped with the equipment, seating and storage arrangement. A crucial aspect of its interior design was the relationship between the mixing desk and outboard gear to the monitoring set-up.

By September 1983, the equipment was operational, and the caravan had been moved to the garage of a property in Concordia, on the border of Soweto, southwest of Johannesburg. Part of a derelict urban prairie owned by Rand Mines Property, it looked down onto the historic Concordia River. The leaseholder, Jacqueline Quinn, was a teacher who worked in Lesotho. She spent most of her time away and needed people to look after the house and her dog, Demo. She kept to herself and came and went almost invisibly.

Ross had approached Uhuru after their performance at the Holiday Inn during the Mohair documentary, but they seemed a little hesitant, perhaps sensing that he had seen only half the band, the other members having left Lesotho to find work. Their singer, Tsepo Tshola, had managed to get to Botswana, where he was recording with Hugh Masekela in his state-of-the-art mobile studio.

Kadey later drove down to Maseru with his wife, his experience in Afro-rock-cross-over music convincing them that an album would be a good career move, especially since Ross would finance the whole enterprise. Being a small, musically tight unit that couldn't travel outside of their own country Uhuru were a perfect first recording project for the new Shifty¹⁶ Mobile Studio, a name Ross came up with. Uhuru fitted the punk-reggae-agit-prop scene popular across Europe, America, the

14 Another gem from Peter Schneider's blog in June 2020: <https://peterschneiderperu.com/the-montreux-casino-fire-1971-i-was-the-last-one-out/>.

15 Here is the whole concert. The link will take you to the section where the fire begins, i.e. where the synth solo ends: <https://youtu.be/9lpFeopjhlI?t=4862>.

16 Kadey had wanted to use the name 'Quark Zarp' but that, sadly, fell on deaf ears.

Caribbean and the UK, and formed many of the studio's reference points. The only problem was the band's name, Uhuru, which was too close to that of the successful reggae band Black Uhuru.

From the blog of Peter Schneider

My parents ... very kindly brought my drum set all the way from Switzerland by plane to Lesotho, and we purchased and 'borrowed' the rest of the equipment. UHURU was born! It was 1975. Frank was very strict at the practice sessions and from the very beginning was the leader of the group. We decided to create a new sound an AFRO – ROCK sound. The only band from Africa who was known in Europe at that time was Osibisa. In long talking and thinking sessions in Black Jesus' house we planned our future. The GUITAR would be the main focus of the band, as in other rock bands from Europe and North America, together with the powerful voice of Tshepo we had a winning formula (Frank also had a great voice and sang on many of the songs) ... The biggest blow of all was when a reggae group from Jamaica called BLACK UHURU became famous. Until today they still play the worldwide concert circuit. So the record company said that we could not use any more the name UHURU, and we had to choose a new name. SANKOMOTA was used in one of Frank's songs and this became the new name of the band.

When asked about the meaning of the name in an interview years later, Leepa replied:

Sankomota was a warrior during the times of the Moshoeshoe. He was a very brilliant guy, a Pedi. During those times, you couldn't exactly say that this person is a Pedi, this one a Sotho. It was only after the difaqane war that we started having rigid groups called 'Pedi' and 'Sotho'. Sankomota was important in creating unity amongst the people at the time.¹⁷

Throwing the switch

At this point, Kadey decided to step back from active participation in recording activities while keeping his interest and involvement in the development of the studio and, later, the label projects. In a conversation we had whilst working on this project, he cited his near-death electrocution as a motivating factor for the life-changing decision, culminating in his immigrating to the United States a few years later.

A fault in the studio earthing completed a circuit through his body, and he clamped onto a security gate as his muscles froze. He was saved when his wife,

¹⁷ F. Leepa, Interview with Ian Kerkhof (*Vula Magazine*, 1986).

Nadine, realising what had happened, quickly threw the mains switch and, remembering some article she had read many years back, beat on his chest and restarted his heart and lungs.

He also alludes to the ground being removed from beneath his feet by the apartheid police, forcing him and his band into paralysis. In 1986 he relocated to California, where he worked as an architect specialising in acoustic and recording studio design.

Suppose Sigmund Freud's notion that illness can take the form of passive aggression is true. In that case, the lives and deaths of the band members of National Wake are the ultimate demonstrations of this: the drummer, Punka Khosa, died of AIDS, his brother Gary committed suicide in the UK and Michael Lebeso, the founder of the band, died destitute living as a hobo on the streets of Johannesburg in the *New South Africa*, the final act of self-deprecation performed against a state which didn't notice and didn't care. I think that Kadey had his heart broken by the shutting down, the silencing of his band and the electrocution was an inevitable co-incidence providing impetus for change.

Down the Golden Highway (November 1983)

My own impetus for change came after an encounter with an artist I met in Cape Town whilst studying there. Gaye Lewin had promised to marry a jeweller but had activated what she called a 'pause button' on the relationship. To extend the metaphor a bit, I think it was more of a 'pause button pressed on a tape that had already been chewed up'.

We packed our separate cars and headed to Johannesburg, where the film and music industries promised work and where Ross had set up his studio in the large Concordia house. He and I knew each other from a three-year association with a Cape Town-based art-rock band, The Happy Ships. There was a need for someone to look after the place, and feed the dog, so we moved into one of the empty rooms which looked out onto the muddy river, once the site of the Amawasha Zulu regiments which used it in the late 1800s to wash and dry the clothes of the inhabitants of the city of Johannesburg¹⁸.

I started learning how to operate the multi-track recording system and had been working on several of my own pieces, laying down and overdubbing tracks at night. These became my *Own Affairs* album, released shortly after the Sankomota SHIFT001 release.

After Kadey's departure, Ross asked if I would assist in the Sankomota recording. He had made a few cassettes of their rehearsals, and I was keen not only to be able to visit Lesotho but also to be involved in work that was relevant and artfully political. Lewin would assist with photography and cable maintenance.

It was a still, clear Saturday morning, and the sun had already evaporated the dew from the dusty driveway, starting up into the cloudless sky. I opened the corrugated

18 C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914: New Babylon Vol. 1* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982).

iron garage doors where the caravan was parked and threw a few bags into the back. Ross and I cranked up the little front wheel and started pulling it towards the blue Ford V6 bakkie that Lewin was reversing slowly towards us. We guided the coupler onto the ball mount of the tow bar and connected the multi-cable electrical plug. Ross climbed in behind the wheel. Negotiating the tight garage door frame required specialist driving skills. It allowed mere millimetres of manoeuvrable space, and as he edged it out, the caravan appeared slowly, like a giant bug pulled from its cocoon, into the morning sunlight. The two vehicles moved onto the dust-road, the caravan rolling from side to side in tow, as we headed towards Baragwanath Road, a fat ladybird waddling through a sea of dust. We carefully glided down onto the freeway where Doppler effect cars sniped past. The three of us, squashed into the cab, felt a pleasurable sense of excitement as we left the city, heading past Uncle Charlies Roadhouse and down the Golden Highway, passing the outskirts of Soweto, the 'Sun City' Prison and onwards; through Vereeniging and Kroonstad, and south towards Lesotho.

Maseru

It was always liberating to leave South Africa. As one approaches another destination layers of oppressiveness seem to shed from the psyche. Even though Lesotho is totally surrounded by our country, it still had (and has) its separateness, something that our government's social engineering, with its homeland projects, could never achieve. The open road welcomed us, and Maseru drew us towards it like a magnet. We were part afro-futuristic space-ship and part nomadic war-machine, to use the French philosophers' Deleuze and Guattari's, term.



Figure 1.

On page 113 of their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*,¹⁹ there is a drawing of a 'nomad chariot' and beneath it, the text: 'The war machine is exterior to the State apparatus.' This exteriority, for me, embraces the outsider space we occupied. That of the cultural activist, as I identified us to be – those who are active in some form of socio-political resistance work. Activists are, by nature, outsiders, but not all outsiders are activists. Our operation fell into the latter category. We were active outsiders remaining

19 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, B. Massumi (trans), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 113. The drawing shown here is my own copy of theirs.

outside the mainstream of activism. Art and politics are always awkward bedfellows. The Greek word *'nomas'* means roaming, roving, wandering, and I felt that our nomadism fitted the mobile studio concept: 'If the nomads formed the war machine, it was by inventing absolute speed, by being "synonymous" with speed. And each time there is an operation against the State – insubordination, rioting, guerrilla warfare, or revolution as act – it can be said that a war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared.' Deleuze and Guattari discuss six variants of the war machine, some not involved with actual war at all. I thought of ours as the 'abstract war machine' pitted against what they term 'a paranoid, signifying, despotic regime of signs'.

We grew 'new nomadic potential' from a rhizome of cables and components soldered together and evolved from a primordial cluster of capacitors, resistors, switches and inductors into specific sound tools and aluminium encasements. Our machinery was set against the state – manifest in over seventy albums of resistance sonic culture – and promised a future by being the first such operation of its kind in our country. It was literally a nomadic war machine from the future, but bringing a future, the future of possibility. In the wake of our war machine, others said, 'this is possible'. Indeed Frank Leepa moved into that smoothed-out space. He quickly understood that 'this was possible' and grew from that point. We all grew from that point. The risk was severe. If he and his band had lived in South Africa at that time, he would conceivably have been detained and physically/psychologically abused or even killed. Many of our artists had been subjected to frequent harassment, detention and bannings by state apparatus.

In an interview with Alec Khaoli – bass player for the seminal South African afro/funk/rock band 'Harari' – David Coplan (2007) discusses the dangers Uhuru/Sankomota were facing from the apartheid authorities. Khaoli said, 'if you play that music, you are going to be taken to John Vorster [Johannesburg Police Headquarters] and never come back.'²⁰

Unpredictable turns and crossroads became a reality as we crept through the Lesotho border, leaving the Free State Fence behind us.

Gaye Lewin (September 2022)

I remember meeting the band at the disused Radio Lesotho studios. They greeted us warmly and showed us where we could park the caravan to connect to the recording rooms. We carried some equipment into the building and locked everything up to start work the following day. We stayed, I think, at the Holiday Inn and that night, Frank, Maruti and Moss invited us to see them opening a show for Hugh Masekela and his band. I can't remember where it was, but it seemed almost like a small stadium – an outdoors venue. It was packed with people. Sankomota played their set, and, before Masekela came on, there was a lucky ticket holder raffle for a huge TV set.

20 D. Copland, *In Township Tonight* (Johannesburg: Ravan/Jacana, 1985/2007), 255–256.

The three of us were the only white people there and guess who won? Lloyd! We couldn't believe it. He went up onto the stage to collect the TV, and there were boos from the crowd. It was so embarrassing. I would have just stayed put in the audience and given the ticket away, but Lloyd went up and then gave the TV to Moss²¹ [Sankomota's drummer].

The nine backing tracks for the album were recorded in the next few days with guide vocals. These were tracked onto an 8 track Otari reel-to-reel machine with microphones coming through a Tapco 12-channel mixing desk set into the front of the caravan. The six instrumental tracks were mixed down and then relayed onto a fresh tape allowing six more tracks to be used for final vocals, percussion and special effects. Later in Johannesburg, Ross would employ Rick Van Heerden to write brass arrangements for the album. These would be added, and the album mixed and released in mid-1984. The 7' single, 'Madhouse', submitted to the SABC, would not be played until the new dispensation.

The sound triggers

In early 2020 I was invited to present a lecture for 'Africa Synthesised', a conference focusing on 'pre-mp3 music' organised by Stellenbosch University. I thought I'd examine the newly digitised Sankomota album and listen to the sounds behind the recordings, to what composer Frank Zappa called the 'studio dirt'. I experienced a melancholia which came over me whilst soloing the separate tracks and listening to the breathing, foot-tapping and counting between verses and choruses. This was human sonic activity from forty years ago. Simon Reynolds wrote:

In a sense, a record really is a ghost: it's a trace of a musician's body, the after-imprint of breath and exertion. There's a parallel between the phonograph and the photograph: both are reality's death mask.²²

I thought I could revisit the record through some atmospheric retro-dub-remix techniques and underscore their inherent Afrofuturist possibilities. Kodwo Eshun had written eloquently on Afrofuturism²³ (a term invented by cyberculture writer Mark Dery). Alondra Nelson²⁴ describes it as 'a canopy for thinking about black diaspora artistic production'. Yet, I always felt a tension between the Afrofuturism of the Atlantic diaspora and mainland Africans and was pleasantly surprised to find a piece of writing which articulated exactly this by American-Nigerian author Nnedi Okorafor who asked that her books be categorised, instead, as 'Africanfuturism' which, she says, 'is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history,

21 This is from a conversation I had with her in Cape Town on Tuesday 22 February 2022 at 9am.

22 S. Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

23 K. Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 175.

24 Deputy director in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Interview at: <https://youtu.be/IFhEjaal5js>.

mythology and point-of-view ... it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or centre the West.²⁵ Sankomota's ghosts and wizards drew down from folklore to the Africanfuturism that Okorafor is proposing. Mathe Ntšekhe, a National University of Lesotho lecturer who writes on Leepa's work, has a blog post titled 'A Frank Dialogue on Baloi', which deals with Leepa's usage of the term in reference to the South African death squad killings of 9 December 1982 and its impact on the erasure of *botho*, a Sotho word similar to *ubuntu* loosely meaning humanity, compassion and kindness.

To Frank, boloi was more than witchcraft, as one might want to translate. Factually speculating, it was a manifestation of greed and the erasure of botho by whiteness [...]. Another definite tell lies in how boloi is crafted into the song [House on Fire]: as a reminder that the killings were done during the mythical operating hours of witches, i.e. from the dead of night to the early hours of the morning.²⁶

The future we imagined for South Africa while making our records never happened. It exists as a ghostly imprint, mnemonically triggered through the sounds recorded at that time. The sound activates a nostalgic pathway, a trigger, not for the bad days of apartheid but for the future we imagined. Svetlana Boym expresses this concerning post-soviet nostalgia, 'the nostalgia explored here is not always for the ancient regime or fallen empire but also for the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete.'²⁷ Both Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds' writings open up theoretical entry points to the idea I was developing on apartheid's cancelled futures, but their focus is primarily on culture and mostly, to use Reynolds' own words, 'retrophobic anxieties about music'. He and Fisher adopt and adapt the term 'hauntology' from Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.²⁸ Fisher writes:

In Derrida's work, 'hauntology' was a play on 'ontology'. The concept of hauntology was partly a restatement of the critical deconstructive claim that 'being' is not equivalent to *presence*. Since there is no point of pure origin, only the time of the 'always-already', then haunting is the state proper to being as such.²⁹

Derrida's book opens with a dedication about an action in 1993 that had its genesis in the spectre of Marx and had shocking and immense hauntological repercussions for South Africa. 'I recall that it is a communist as such, a communist as

25 N. Okorafor, *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*: <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html?m=1>.

26 M. Ntšekhe, *A Frank Dialogue on 'Boloi'*. *Personal musings on 'being'*, Blog of 7 May 2017, <http://www.mathevk.org/frank-dialogue-boloi/>.

27 S. Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). See on iBooks: Introduction / Taboo on Nostalgia (four pages in).

28 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 125. The reference to Chris Hani is in the 'Dedication'.

29 M. Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, 5, 2, 2013, 42–55.

communist, whom a Polish emigrant and his accomplices, all the assassins of Chris Hani, put to death a few days ago, April 10th. The assassins themselves proclaimed that they were out to get a communist.'

The specter that Marx was talking about then, communism, was there without being there. It was not yet there. It will never be there. There is no Dasein of the specter, but there is no Dasein without the uncanniness, without the strange familiarity (Unheimlichkeit) of some specter ... as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond the phenomenon or beyond being.³⁰

Derrida uses Heidegger's word 'dasein', a Germanic solipsistic opposite to *botho/ ubuntu* mentioned above ('I am' as opposed to 'We are'). However, the key part of Derrida's text is its relationship to communism. My investigations into the Sankomota album's hauntology revealed a double layer of spectres that have infiltrated *botho/ ubuntu* and haunted South Africa long before Hani's assassination. The persistence of communism and the persistence of racism have hampered economic and social growth. The notion of communism being there without being there is the nature of the communist methodology. The communist coup that brought, for instance, Jacob Zuma into power, was there but wasn't there. A true spectre of Marx. 'In the name of the revolution, the double barricade' is the title to the chapter I have quoted above. The double barricades for South Africa, I believe, are these two spectres. The spectre of apartheid and the spectre of communism.

Out of all the music we had recorded over the years, the Sankomota album carried more melancholia, mourning and loss than any other. The ghostly absences of the band through different incarnations over different time-frames is reflected in the Shifty recordings. The later ten-piece Sankomota band featured only a handful of songs in which Frank Leepa was the lead vocalist. It is a pity he never recorded a solo album because his singing style suited his own songs.

He understood the technology of the microphone and used it to raise the audibility of an intimate performance. His words were straightforward and sincere, and his voice conveyed that. This was what was appealing about the three-piece band that Ross recorded. Tshola's voice, on the other hand, was big and operatic and projected acoustically above choirs and in large stadiums and concert spaces. He was called the Village Pope and brought a masculine religiosity to their sound. David Byrne, in his book 'How Music Works', speaks of how microphones changed singing and heralded the era of the crooner.

The microphones that recorded singers changed the way they sang and the way their instruments were played. Singers no longer had to have great

30 J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994). p125

lungs to be successful. Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby were pioneers when it came to singing ‘to the microphone.’ They adjusted their vocal dynamics in ways that would have been unheard of earlier. It might not seem that radical now, but crooning was a new kind of singing back then. It wouldn’t have worked without a microphone. Chet Baker even sang in a whisper, as did João Gilberto, and millions followed. To a listener, these guys are whispering like a lover, right into your ear, getting completely inside your head. Music had never been experienced that way before. Needless to say, without microphones this intimacy wouldn’t have been heard at all.³¹

Houses on fire

Ross lent me his copy of Mpho Leepa’s biographical book on her brother, *Born for Greatness: Biography of Frank Leepa*.³² I was haunted for days by her account of the death of their father, a former high-ranking policeman in Maseru and Moshoeshe II loyalist. He was hounded, and eventually gunned down in the Maluti mountains in a mysterious assassination assisted by South African helicopters. This was during the 1970 coup d’état, which propelled Leboa Jonathan into government and sent the King into exile.

The practice of burning opposing members’ houses saw the family living in terror each time the army marched past. She says, ‘It had hardly been two days since Father’s absence when we heard a rumour at school and at the local store that our house was going to be burnt down because father was a communist.’ Frank Leepa’s song, ‘House on Fire’, came from this period. Phehello Mofokeng says:

House on Fire is a historical reflection of the political situation in Lesotho and why the 1970s and 1980s in Lesotho must never be forgotten by Basotho. The title of the song could have easily been Hearts on Fire – for Basotho’s hearts were on fire during this period. War, violence and tragedy are evoked and the anti-apartheid theme is thick in this song ... One of the methods of intimidation was the burning of people’s houses. When Frank Leepa’s father was being hunted down by Lesotho armed forces, they promised to burn his house down to force him to surrender. In the end, they did not, but many other people’s houses were ‘on fire’ burnt down by the armed forces.³³

Mofokeng goes on to talk about the wider context of the song lyrics, situating the burning of houses in a post-1976 South Africa:

31 D. Byrne, *How Music Works* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2012), 25–26.

32 M. Leepa, *Born for Greatness: Biography of Frank Leepa* (Johannesburg: Geko Publishing, 2018), 68.

33 P. Mofokeng, *Ode to Sankomota: A reflective essay* (Johannesburg: Geko Publishing, 2018), 93–94.

Many township streets were on fire, so were houses. Schools, bars, clinics, Bantu administration buildings and black businesses that were assumed to be supported by white people or by the government were mostly set alight. Thick plumes of burning tyre smoke rising above townships was a typical sight. Many people were also set alight. This was the mad time of necklacing. Necklacing is colloquial for burning someone with a tyre hanging around their neck. The tyre would be typically doused with petrol and set alight ... The white settlers and oppressors of Africans all over the globe can be interpreted as the 'witches' [*baloi*] in the song and they need to be confronted with *thebe le lerumo* (shield and spear). This makes *House on Fire* an important, prophetic song in the liberation efforts as well.

Mofokeng feels that Sankomota were not overt about their politicality and mostly couched their message in what he refers to as abstraction. Using signs and symbols like totems, Leepa evokes a subtle but clear message to his audience: a hidden politicality easily passed over by authorities.

Sankomota did not sing with concealment as much as it was with abstraction of sorts. Abstraction that still made sense that is borrowed from the nature of Sesotho as a language. Abstraction is important in Sesotho as a deeply poetic and symbolic language. Sankomota's first album is an experiment in abstraction and symbolism ...

Frank Leepa's abstractivism could have its roots in Thomas Mofolo's Sesotho language novel, *Chaka*, an abstracted version of the tale of the rise and fall of the Zulu king. First published in English in 1931, it is a book full of myth, magic and murder and written by an almost Herodotus type of character. Mofolo travels down from the Maluti mountains into Zululand to research the story, speaking to actual witnesses and making notes. He, like Herodotus, weaves history and storytelling together to give weight to his ideas. He fictionalises and personifies the evolution of evil in Chaka's life through a mystical magician, combining myth and magic to explain the supernatural. So too, is Sankomota, the warrior and symbol of resistance and black unity, a similar figure of insufficient factuality. He may or may not have existed. A ghostly presence echoes in the band's name and its legion of musicians, all of whom have since passed away. Frank Leepa's employment of the same through his lyrics and storytelling is, at the same time, both abstraction (insufficient factuality) and fearful possibility. Both writers cast their nets into a then-future which we are now living,³⁴ a then-future which currently has no future. We look at the past to re-live the future.

[W]hen the Mangwane heard the heart-rending cries from the village, they looked back, and they saw heavy smoke from their homes which were on

34 S. Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011). See the sub-chapter 'Future Fatigue' in chapter 11 'Out of Space'.

fire; they saw their children and their women scattered on the plains and the hills fleeing in all directions.³⁵

Don't surf

The most tragic Sankomota story was the death of bass player, Maruti Selati who mysteriously fell from a building in London. He left the band and moved to the UK to work for Peter Schneider's father. Cathy Ingram, a Lesotho national who was part of the early Uhuru scene, and left to marry an American, writes that sometime between 2000 and 2001, a friend named Cecily called and informed her of Maruti's death. (She spells his name Moruti.)

[H]e had fallen from the high rise apartments in London. The details were vague but the Lesotho government had bought him home. Cecily and I attended the funeral. It was extremely shocking and sad, we could not stop asking why and how could he have fallen? When we finally accepted that he was gone from us, we found peace by accepting accidental death.

My last conversation with Maruti was in London in 1988. I was there preparing for a series of concerts with my band, The Kalahari Surfers, and heard that he was playing at a venue quite close to me. His band was called 'Bushmen Don't Surf', and I remember him being of his usual cheerful disposition, joking about doing a show together and sharing a similar logo. I wasn't sure about the name of his band – was it a comment on my name or the famous line from *Apocalypse Now*, 'Charlie Don't Surf', also a 1980 song by the Clash; either way, it was a minefield of explanations that I wished to avoid.

Moss Nkofo and Frank Leepa passed on shortly after Maruti during the early part of the 2000s, and Tsepo Tshola, their popular singer, who re-joined the band after the Shifty album, died of Covid 19 related symptoms in July 2021.

Jackie Quinn was to die the year following the album's release in another Maseru Christmas cross-border commando raid killing nine people, including her husband Leon Meyer (Joe). Ross and I discovered this through a horrendous front-page photo of her and Meyer sprawled out on a concrete floor in the morgue in Maseru. The caption beneath the picture was as tastelessly captioned, mentioning her husband's race twice and getting his name wrong:

SUNDAY TIMES DEC 22 –1985

Figure 2: Jackie Quin [sic] and her coloured husband Joe. Sunday Times, 22 December 1985. Courtesy of Trevor Samson.

35 T. Mofolo, *Chaka* (first published in 1925), iBooks, see Chapter 14: 'Chaka Is Installed as his Father's Successor'.

They lie side by side in the mortuary their bodies half covered by a hospital sheet, their clothing in disarray: Jackie Quin [sic] and her coloured husband Joe. The couple were shot dead by a murder squad which burst into their home in Maseru on Thursday night. Seven other people attending a party at another house were also killed. The ANC claim Jackie Quin [sic] to be one of their members. Her grieving parents deny it. The couple's baby daughter Phoenix survived the massacre.

Mofokeng's writing at times borders on obsequious but, here, his hyperbole is endearing, and it does convey, I think, an accurate sense of the cultural impact of the work.

They recorded Sankomota's first album and with this single musical act, history was changed forever. When subjects of Moshoeshoe slumbered that night, they did not know the proportions of history that were made that day.³⁶



Figure 2: Left to right: The author, Frank Leepa, Sunshine Mokoena, Otari 8 Track recorder, Lloyd Ross, Moss Nkofo and Maruti Selate inside the caravan. Photograph by Gaye Lewin.

Khotso, Pula, Nala

Peace, Rain, Prosperity.

³⁶ P. Mofokeng, *Sankomota: An Ode in One Album – A Reflective Essay* (Johannesburg: Geko Publishing, 2018), 17.

Postscript (8 October 2022)

Whilst revising my corrections for this piece I came across a recording posted on 9 July 2021 by an anonymous Welsh person on YouTube under the name RHYL. It is titled, *Sankomota – Live – August 1985 – ‘Afrika’*, and the caption below it reads:

Sankomota were a band from the ‘mountain kingdom’ of Lesotho. This performance was recorded during ‘Arian Byw’ (Money for Life) an Ethiopian famine appeal concert at the National Eisteddfod in Rhyl, North Wales, UK on Sunday 11th August 1985. The name of the song is ‘Afrika’. The members of Sankomota were Frank Leepa, Moss Nkofo, Black Jesus, Moruti Selate, Tsepo Tshola ‘The Village Pope’ & Pitso Sera among others.

It’s an extraordinary performance in that it feels like what the original Uhuru band should have sounded like had they been able to stay in South Africa. In other words, it should have been the band that Lloyd Ross saw at the hotel had it not been for the heavy hand of apartheid. The band are on top form playing a heavy Afrosoul/rock with screaming guitar solos and a fat heavy bass and drum sound that sits surprisingly well with their dynamics and subtly balanced harmony singing. With nods to both Fela Kuti and Hugh Masekela, the band at this point were poised for success. It’s a pity that as Tsepho was about to introduce each member a neurotic compere runs onto stage, cuts in and chases them off.³⁷

³⁷ YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=altzZg4mFmo>.