

Chapter 39

Afrikaner Music and Identity Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Bok van Blerk and the De la Rey Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

A song about a Boer War general, released in 2006, stirred controversy in South Africa by triggering a gearshift amongst Afrikaners towards re-engaging in the political process. The song “De la Rey”, which became a popular South African hit, captured the alienation many Afrikaners felt at having become a politically marginalized and disempowered ethnic minority within a state where Black Nationalism had become the dominant discourse. The song triggered the De la Rey phenomenon in which Afrikaners became once more politically assertive, following a decade in which this community had been politically dormant. Afrikaners took to singing “De la Rey” as a sort of ‘national anthem’ when they gathered in sports stadiums, BBQs, pubs and parties. Twelve months after “De la Rey” was released, the South African government expressed concern the song could become “a rallying point for treason”. The De la Rey phenomenon offers an excellent fulcrum to consider how music can provide a platform for political messages which have consequences for the political process.

INTRODUCTION

Twelve years after Afrikaners lost control of South Africa’s political-system, music became a fulcrum for Afrikaners to begin mouthing discontent about their place within the post-apartheid socio-political order. In the decade before this, Afrikaners had retreated into a form of ‘sullen acquiescence’ within a political system which had rendered them a marginalized and disempowered minority within a state

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3019-1.ch039

where black nationalism was the dominant discourse. Their ‘sullen silence’ was broken in 2006 by a song called *De la Rey*. Because this song’s lyrics so resonated with Afrikaner alienation and frustration, it became an instant hit; thereby propelling musician Bok van Blerk from obscurity to stardom.

As the amount of radio playtime soared, the resultant *De la Rey* phenomenon kindled a new form of Afrikaner identity politics plus much debate in newspapers, radio and television about the reawakening of an Afrikaner voice in the public sphere. It did not take long for *De la Rey* to mutate into a sort of alternative ‘national anthem’ which was sung whenever Afrikaners gathered in sports stadiums, BBQs, pubs and parties. Twelve months after *De la Rey* was released, the South African government expressed concern the song was becoming “a rallying point for treason” (Memela, 2007). Effectively, the government was recognizing that “the power of music can be harnessed to...evoke and articulate unwelcome sentiments and identities” (Street, 2003, p. 117) which could challenge the ruling hegemony.

The *De la Rey* phenomenon unleashed a political debate far larger than one might have expected from the release of one song. At one level this occurred simply because for a decade Afrikaners had appeared to accept, and adjust themselves to, the 1994 transfer of political power into black hands. What the *De la Rey* phenomenon suggested was that Afrikaner acquiescence was being replaced with the first signs of opposition to the post-1994 political order. Effectively the *De la Rey* phenomenon brought with it a recognition that South Africa’s new political order had not solved the fraught question of the relationship between race/ethnicity and power in what remained a deeply divided society. What *De la Rey* highlighted was the fact that South Africa now had a new political problem – namely there existed a large ethnic minority who felt both alienated from, and disempowered by, the mainstream political process.

South Africa is, of course, not alone in facing the problem of such an ethnic/racial minority who feel politically disempowered; nor is South Africa alone in facing the danger this creates of the minority group becoming antagonistic to the socio-political system (because they perceive power-differentials as permanently disadvantaging them in the larger society). Other examples would be African-Americans in the USA; Palestinians in Israel; Basques and Catalans in Spain; Catholics in Northern Ireland; Kurds in Turkey; Chechens in Russia; Uighurs in China; Assamese in India; Maronites in Lebanon; Matabele in Zimbabwe; Chinese in Malaysia; Indians in Fiji, and Tamils in Sri Lanka. And as a number of the above cases have demonstrated, the potential for such political alienation to mutate into armed conflict is always a real possibility. And so when *De la Rey* became a sort of alternative ‘national anthem’ cum protest song for Afrikaners, all South Africans recognized that the awakening of this new form of identity politics was not an insignificant matter.

MUSICAL CATALYST FOR A NEW IDENTITY POLITICS: SINGING ABOUT THE BOER WAR

In March 2006, Bok van Blerk and the Mossies released the album *Jy praat nog steeds my taal* (You still speak my language). The album was re-released in October 2006 under the name *De La Rey* and solely credited to Bok van Blerk. Co-written by Bok van Blerk (alias Louis Pepler), Sean Else and Johan Vorster, the *De La Rey* song purports to tell the story of General Koos de la Rey’s struggle against British imperialism. Bok van Blerk said the song was simply about Afrikaner history. This may be so, but it is an historical narrative that clearly resonated with the contemporary political mood of many Afrikaners. The song was a carefully constructed political narrative mobilizing many of the core tropes and symbols of Afrikaner nationalism. On the surface, it was about the Afrikaners’ struggle against Britain during

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