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Anarchy Through Music in Africa at the New York Film Festival

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METROPOLIS MUSIC NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

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By JACKIE BISCHOF



—Punk in Africa Paulo Jorge Chibanga, drummer for ska/dub band 340ml from Mozambique, performs on stage.

The documentary "Punk in Africa," which had its U.S. premiere at the New York Film Festival Wednesday night, profiles some of the punk bands that have sprung up out of the political unrest in sub-Saharan Africa from the 1970s to today.

The bands were anarchic, vocal about their protest of racial segregation and tried to play to mixed-race audiences, which often got them into trouble with police. After the end of the civil war in Mozambique, and the start of democratic rule in South Africa, a new wave of bands emerged in the mid-90s, mixing ska, reggae and punk influences with local African sounds. The music of bands in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique remains political, and the use of punk music to protest unfair circumstances has spread more recently to other areas in Africa, such as Kenya and the Congo.

Metropolis spoke with Keith Jones, one of the film's directors, at the documentary's premiere at the New York Film Festival. The edited interview follows.

WSJ: *Whose idea was it to do a film on the punk movement in southern Africa?*

Jones: The genesis for the film came directly out of a previous film that all of us worked on called **Durban Poison**, which was a film that dealt more with a history of radical history in South Africa. I was scheduled to take a long road trip off with my co-director and our co-producer in the film, Deon Maas, from Johannesburg. We were a little bit overwhelmed by the ... response that we had to the prior film, because it reached a very different market, and a different audience in South Africa than we anticipated, not a conventional documentary audience, but a mainstream prime-time television audience.

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About Metropolis



We realized that whatever we had a chance to do something very educational, very entertaining and very far-reaching, if we did it correctly.

On the course of this road trip, Deon and I were listening to a lot of South African music from all eras and all genres, everything from very contemporary hip hop to very traditional Zulu music and [traditional Afrikaans] boeremusiek, we recognized that every single thing we were hearing had a common strain, that there was some social commentary in the popular music, dating back to the 1940s, 1930s. We started talking about this tendency for hours in the car, about popular music as a form of protest and vehicle for social commentary, the uniqueness of that and how it's different from how it plays out in different places. What we discovered was that not only was there this very interesting and strong underground punk rock movement in South Africa, but that it had never been documented.



— Punk in Africa

WSJ: *Why is it fascinating for people that sub-Saharan Africa had a punk movement?*

Jones: It's strange because first of all, they've never heard of it. They just are very taken by the title of the film, the logo. They find it intriguing. When they read the description and see that the film is a political film that happens to have a punk soundtrack, that's then very interesting. That it's not just a bunch of random bands, that it's actually a political story that happens to play out through music.

WSJ: *What's the story?*

Jones: It's a story of resistance, and how art can be used as a means to change the way people think.

WSJ: *How easy was it to find some of the older bands?*

Jones: With this film, what was new that was never part of the equation before, was Facebook. We were able to use our [Facebook page](#) to accelerate the research and get in touch with people much more quickly. We happened to find these guys and exactly the moment when they emerged on Facebook for the first time and they hadn't been in touch with each other in 25 years, in some cases.

We found people in Los Angeles, in London, in Australia and even in Prague that had been in the really formative early bands, who have a very tight bond with each other. But they kind of found each other again in the process of us making the film, and rediscovered this closeness. A lot of them were kind of ran out of the country. Their lives fell apart and they were under such police harassment that they got fed up and left and mostly hadn't done music at all in the interceding years.

WSJ: *In the past year, there's been a lot of interest in the [role of music in the region](#)... Is part of the reason behind this interest the fact that people were very isolated during the time and didn't get a big international reception?*

Jones: It's almost 20 years since the end of apartheid and the end of the civil war in Mozambique, and it's a good time to reevaluate the 1980s. It's easier to see things in focus, and what was really important, the role that some of these things played, which was overlooked at the time. Also, even 10 years ago, music documentaries were very marginal, and it was something that within the documentary culture was sidelined, and I think it's grown up. The idea that a music documentary isn't just about music, but it's looking at how bigger stories take place, music is just a means to look at those things. It is a broader trend, not just an African trend.

WSJ: *If you had to pick one band from the documentary to listen to on a road trip, which would it be?*

Jones: I like them all ... I might actually say 340 ml [from Mozambique.] They don't actually get enough love and they're a great band, our friends in Maputo.

A list of the bands featured in the film, as well as clips of their music are featured on the [documentary's website](#).

Watch the official trailer for 'Punk in Africa'

A blog of reporting and news from New York City, Metropolis is produced by [Carrie Melago](#) and [Tom Namako](#), with contributions from the Wall Street Journal staff. Send tips and comments to metropolis@wsj.com.

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