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Nothing Was Desirable: A Review Of ‘Punk In Africa’

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(<http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/NatWake4ii.jpg>)

Documentaries about punk music often have a political element. But that political element sometimes seems rather contrived. Fair or not, we wind up rolling our eyes, not at the concern for the apportionment of power in the society being examined, but in both the melodramatic earnestness of the participants and the mirthlessness of the filmmakers. Punk is joyous, joyous destruction, joyous transgression, joyous creation – joy is the true political structure of punk, more than any cladding you can tack to it. In **Deon Maas's** and **Keith Jones's** *Punk in Africa*, however, the political element is anything but contrived. In the film punk acts as a lever for political change, and the need for political change powers the joy of the music.

Punk in Africa examines the punk scene in Southern Africa from the 70s onward, an era in which apartheid was being challenged in South Africa with violent repercussions, civil war burned across Mozambique and **Robert Mugabe** began his massacres in Zimbabwe. At this time, a combination of musical catholicity, the urge to break out of the stifling patterns of the past, and an influx of (white) U.K. citizens lit the slow fuse that transformed Southern African music. It wasn't an explosion, it was an uninhibited musical miscegenation, in which

punk and native musical traditions met – and screwed in the bathroom at the youth club.

Although created with the latest in technology – in fact, a great deal of the connections made, footage and photos gathered, accounts and illustrations were obtained via social media sites, **Facebook** in particular – the aesthetic of the movie is refreshing in how faithful it is to the punk visual aesthetic. The material artifacts of the age, like fliers (ask your dad) and 45 covers (ask your mom), govern the way the movie looks.

“You Know What Comes After Irony? F*ck You!”



http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/NW_19811.jpg

The melody of the movie is one of profound humanity. There are people – recognizable people – in the movie, with their fears, boredom, resolution, sorrow and joy registering materially on you as they move through the flickering images. These aren't rock stars. F*ck rock stars. These aren't even icons. These are the people who answer the question that **Wild Youth** asked, “What about me?” These are “me.”

In the U.S. or the U.K. a two-toned band was a “political” statement, in the sense that it argued, in tangible terms for a turn away from a status quo that consisted of inertia and separation. It could get you grief in these places. But in apartheid South Africa, to have a band whose members were of different races – and many, like **National Wake**, were – is the kind of political act that solicits possible imprisonment and beating. It was a profound rupture with the past. It was punk.



<http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/national-wake.jpg>

The mentality was police state. As music journalist **Dianne Coetze** tells the filmmakers: “It was an incredibly repressive time to live, even if you were white... Your psychology, your ability to think big, your ability to engage with broader society was so constrained, that when this movement came along, it allowed people to be anarchic. That element of anarchy very much fed into the feeling that you wanted to go against the apartheid regime.”

“You Sound Like Where You’re From.”

Even as South Africa transforms itself into something approximating a “rainbow nation,” the challenges of freedom remain and the music continues to reflect it, sometimes in joy, often still in anger, but with a sense of possibility. Among the many questions that punk wrestles with in a post-apartheid era, “what is African?”

In the States, we tend to see punk as an historical moment whose aesthetic is occasionally resurrected in either costume play or homage. *Punk in Africa* shows it as more of a continuum, taking the audience from National Wake’s manic headlong danceability to **Hog Hoggidy Hog** and **Fuzigish**, with their horns, African jazz influence and ska and reggae inflections.



<http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/malapoets.jpg>

All the bands in the movie express, debate or confront Africanness, but for the younger ones, the struggle with the question of who and what Africa is in these latter days seem to be a more conscious one, which they give form to in their music and lyrics. Who's African now? Is white African? Is Afrikaans African?

Zimbabwean punk-metal band **Evicted** (below), with their thick, furry punk-metal urgency woven with African harmonies and high, dancing traditional guitar interludes answers the question sonically: this is something brand new, but with deep roots. Something African.

"This is our country, this is our home," says Evicted's **Nick Newberry**. "We love it here, love the people here."



http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/zim_evicted2.jpg

In the same way we all share the same basic makeup both physically and mentally – arms, legs, heads, psyches, souls – but our experience gives us individuality, punk is a common substrate but the specific efforts we make to drive our message through it gives us musical individuality. You see that process play out in living color in this movie.

"We Were Partying While the War Was Happening"

Mozambique shared many of the same concerns, musically, that South Africa had. But the pressure cooker of the capital, Maputo, created a highly centralized scene. There, Mozambicans of all backgrounds found an outlet for the fact that the simplest things – going to the beach – were impossible due to the civil war.

The strange discord of freedom – Mozambican radio was never censored, for instance – and violence (from a decades-long war between civil factions in the country) expressed itself musically by turning up ska higher in the mix.

"Ska is the African side of punk," says **Paulo Chibango** of the multiracial band **340ml**. "I don't want to say it's a happy music because thematically it isn't always happy, but once you're there and enjoying (yourself), that element is kind of happy."



http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/zim_rudimentals-1280x720.jpg

[1280x720.jpg](http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/zim_rudimentals-1280x720.jpg)

Zimbabwe struggled with its own civil unrests, yoked to the overwhelming influence of its president, Robert Mugabe, a hero-turned-villain who indulged in repeated massacres, large and

small, against his own people in the wake of independence.

Here, too, with bands like **The Rudimentals** (above), led by Zimbabwean singer **Teboho Maidza**, the ska element tuned punk up, insisting on a kind of transcendence despite the politics rather than through it.

"The guys I was working with in Zimbabwe believed in the ruling party," says Maidza. "We used to play music to...make people aware of what was happening in the country and suddenly, we were working with a politician? We're not going to run a propaganda machine, because politicians change like chameleons!"

Evicted's singer **Derek Bailey** says the reality of political repression, with music caught in the middle and having to respond to it, is not an historical situation in his country. There were rumors that security police had shown up at their gigs. "We've had to change our lyrics a couple of times so we don't step on anyone's toes... If they want to get rid of you, they will."



([http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/nationalwake_79-](http://oka-cdn.okayplayer.com/wp-content/uploads/nationalwake_79-Copy.jpg)

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Party On, Punkers

Punk at its best has never been a "cool" movement and "Punk in Africa" is militantly uncool, in that it accurately reflects the passion, anger, frustration, love and pure energy of the musicians it covers. It's a music of ferocious joy and the movie is the retinal afterimage and echo of that joy. First, it moved us. It was a battle to keep the tears out of our eyes long enough to keep watching a lot of the time, a battle we didn't always win. Second, it's punk as f*ck.

Listen to the Punk In Africa mixtape by DJ Zhao [here](http://www.okayafrica.com/2012/02/03/audio-punk-in-africa-mixtape-by-dj-zhao/) (<http://www.okayafrica.com/2012/02/03/audio-punk-in-africa-mixtape-by-dj-zhao/>) and listen to our interview with the filmmakers [here](http://www.okayafrica.com/2011/12/09/audio-interview-filmmakers-of-punk-in-africa/) (<http://www.okayafrica.com/2011/12/09/audio-interview-filmmakers-of-punk-in-africa/>).

Story by OKA contributor [Curt Hopkins](http://morphemetals.wordpress.com/) (<http://morphemetals.wordpress.com/>).

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