Call and Response.

Johnny Dyani – an African Musician in Europe

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PETER NIKLAS WILSON: Call and Response. Johnny Dyani – an African Musician in Europe

„I feel that my bass is part of me. I used to sleep with my bass in the bed when I used to get high. My wife used to think it was weird, but she knew because I used to explain to her. “

1. Sharp and Flat

The location: Ronnie Scott’s jazz club, London, the time: the late sixties. Charles Mingus is in town. The larger-than-life bassist makes the acquaintance of another powerful bass individualist: Johnny Dyani. Somehow, the South African exile manages the near-impossible: to convince Mingus to let him play with his group. We don’t have Mingus’ version of this encounter. Johnny Dyani’s story goes as follows:  

Mingus came to me and he said to me, „Can you read“?“
I said, „No“:
He said, „I can read“:
I said, „Good for you“, and he was making all funny comments.
Then we played […]
When we finished (and it was a helluva night, I’m telling you), he said to me, „You sounded sharp“.
So I said, „You sounded flat.“

It takes more than just a bit of self-confidence to confront Charles Mingus – a „mercurial“ personality, euphemistically said - in this way. By the late Sixties, Johnny Dyani had it. With good reason. He was well aware that he, the South African musician, had something to offer that was unique in the world of jazz. It was a newly gained self-confidence, a self-assuredness grown in the difficult process of adapting to the European exile.

Listen to any Johnny Dyani recording from 1966 onwards – starting with The Forest and the Zoo with Steve Lacy, Enrico Rava, Louis Moholo – and compare it with the live recording of the Blue Notes made in Durban in 1964, shortly before the sextet would leave the country for good, and you cannot fail to to remark a staggering difference. Is this really the same bass player on these recordings only two years apart (or the same drummer, for that matter)?

Durban, 1964: We hear a music firmly rooted in the lingua franca of American Hard Bop, close to the idiom of Art Blakey’s „Jazz Messengers“, with just the barest hints of the new sounds created by Eric Dolphy or Ornette Coleman: an American music played by Non-Americans with a strong individual dialect. Johnny Dyani: A full-toned bass player doing what a bass player is expected to do in a Hard Bop group, anchoring time and harmony with strong walking bass lines, contributing the occasional solo in the Oscar Pettiford mold.

Buenos Aires, 1966: We hear a bass player who has liberated himself from all idiomatic constraints concerning meter or harmony. An autonomous voice in a freely interactive quartet music, utilizing the whole tonal and timbral range of his instrument with virtuoso agility and confidence.

The same might be said of his „Blue Notes“-partner Louis Moholo. It is obvious that the South African exiles have taken to the unwritten rules of Free Jazz like ducks to water, for reasons musical and extra-musical. For there are implications in freely improvised music beyond technicalities. As Louis Moholo once put it:  

„When we first came here [to Europe] I started hearing some other vibes. I was away from South Africa and away from the chains. I just wanted to be free, totally free, even in music. Free to shake away all the slavery, anything to do with slavery, being boxed in to places – one, two, three, four – and being told you must come in after four. […] Free music is it, man, it’s so beautiful The word ‘free’ makes sense to me, that’s what I want, let my people go."

The late sixties, the early seventies: Johnny Dyani certainly gets around. He performs with key players of the European Free Music circuit such as John Stevens, Evan Parker, Peter Brötzmann, Irène Schweizer and the American exiles Steve Lacy and Don Cherry. In the United States, he plays with McCoy Tyner, Archie Shepp, Bobby Bradford, but also with Wes Montgomery, later also with David Murray and Joseph Jarman and Don Moye of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.
Dyani’s music changes in Europa, as does the music of Chris McGregor, Mongezi Feza, Dudu Pukwana, Louis Moholo. In the South Africa of 1964, the sounds they created were considered sophisticated, hip, avantgarde. Basically, it was American music with an African dialect. There were few obvious references to specifically South African genres like Township Jazz or Kwela. And why should there have been? There was plenty of that around at home. There was no aesthetic necessity to refer to it. In Europe, the context has changed. There is plenty of modern jazz to be heard in Zürich and London, and Hard Bop is already considered old hat. There is little sense in importing second-hand American music to the Old World. Kwela and Township Jazz, however, take on a new significance: the significance of something once commonplace, but now lost. The significance of something personal, something unique that they, the South African exiles, might contribute to the kaleidoscope of European jazz. But how to reconcile the melodic and structural simplicity of Kwela with the total openness of Free Jazz, the new language one has only just mastered? While the Blue Notes are still in Zurich, in 1964 or 1965, something makes an indelible impression on them: the early recordings of an American saxophone player who has managed to synthesize exactly these extremes, melodic simplicity and Free Jazz energy. And, what’s more: the sounds of this American iconoclast also bring back some memories from the South African jazz scene. As Johnny Dyani was to recall later:

„There was a tenor player there [in South Africa] who was playing baritone at the time. His name was Mra [alias Christopher Ngcukana, also known as Christopher Columbus] and he called the so-called ‚free jazz’ fowl run. That was his expression for the music. When we were playing for the [jazz] operas the band would have a spot and he would suggest we have a ‚fowl run’; everybody would start screaming!

We heard Albert Ayler’s records for the first time in Zurich at Dollar’s house. Dollar said, ‚This man here sounds really mean’. That was Albert Ayler and he sounded weird but he sounded like this old man, Mra, and the fowl run, he had the same kind of feeling."

Seen in this light, it is not too surprising that Dyani’s composition „Does Your Father Know“ (on Angolian Cry) has more than faint echoes of Ayler’s „Holy Spirit“ (on Vibrations, 1964).

Europe, ca. 1970. Johnny Dyani has mastered the syntax of European Free Jazz. But is it his own language? After the euphoria of the liberation from political and musical constraints, disillusionment is quick to follow. In retrospect, the months spent with Lacy and Rava are seen in a sceptical light (a scepticism, to be fair, that may have been coloured by the fact that Lacy had returned to Europe abruptly, leaving Dyani and Moholo stranded in Argentine without money to return).

„I thought this thing was interesting but in the end I found myself wondering. I realised I’d heard it all before in South Africa and played it, too. There was nothing new in what Lacy was doing."

Dyani’s Blue Notes colleagues are not exempt from criticism, either. In 1970, Dyani maintains: „Chris McGregor’s musicians are not doing what they were talking about in South Africa; they are losing their way and letting themselves be influenced by Americans and that’s why I find it difficult to play with them.”

„I’d heard it all before in South Africa”. The danger of losing one’s way, one’s identity. It is obvious that Johnny Dyani is reflecting about his personal and musical identity, that he is undergoing the process of discovering himself far from home – like so many artists (and not only artists) in exile. Who am I? What is my voice? What can I contribute to music? There are many aspects to the unique musical personality of Johnny Mbizo Dyani, aspects of the Dyani mindset that became prominent once Dyani had his coming-out as a leader in the early Seventies. Let us single out five of them.

2. The Dyani Mindset

1. A vocal conception of bass playing

Louis Moholo, who knew Johnny Dyani from childhood, recalls:

„When he was a young boy with a singing band and I was playing drums backing them, he was such a fantastic singer, singing the high notes with such ease. Then he switched from alto-singing to bass-playing, and he played it so well […].“

For Dyani himself, the transition from singing to playing was apparently an organic one:
I finally began playing the bass because the choir singing interested me. I don’t mean the European choir but the tribal singing, these choirs with deep voices. The bass player who gave me the first lessons was very aware of that. He advised me to listen to the deep voices. I guess that’s the reason why I sound different from other bass players.

This very difference could be discerned on various levels. It is evident in the fact that Dyani’s bass patterns are invariably notably melodic and memorable. Also, the quick to and fro between deep bass register and falsetto tessitura in Dyani’s solos recalls African vocal techniques – the very techniques at work when Johnny Dyani sings, as he does on various recordings (i.e. African Bass, Some Jive-Ass Boers and Together). The musician Johnny Dyani is unimaginable without Johnny Dyani, the singer. As Dyani knew only too well.

“You cannot play music without knowing how to sing. The voice comes first. For instance, when I was playing with singers they told me not to play the bass notes but a deep vocal part. This was very strange at the beginning.”

The vocal aspect, it should be added, also applies to the work of Johnny Dyani, the pianist and Johnny Dyani, the composer. If one listens to a piece like „Wish You Sunshine“ (on Born under the Heat), one hears the three-part vocal harmonies of South African choirs, the sound of isicathamiya groups such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo which also informs Johnny Dyani’s scoring for horn sections.

2. Music as an Oral Tradition

In the course of its short history, jazz rapidly mutated from a music in the oral tradition to a music in which literacy plays an important role – despite all attempts, namely in Free Jazz, to obliterate those „Western“ aspects of notation and orthodox academic technique. Johnny Dyani was largely self-taught, did not write down his music – and made a point that he regarded this not as a shortcoming, but as a virtue. Learning music by ear teaches you to listen to every subtle nuance of the music. And it keeps you in touch with the now.

„Wes Montgomery asked me if I could read music. I said no and that I was self-taught. He was very happy and told me that he could not read either. He asked me how I was getting along and I told him that I had had a tough time convincing musicians that I knew what I was doing because I couldn’t read. He advised me; he said that when he was younger he had tried to read music but he couldn’t. Then later he had tried again and it spoilt his music – the way he was playing. So he suggested that I don’t try it. He said that it was a good idea just to be original. You have your intuition and you need to be aware, to be advanced in thinking. The guys who read don’t need to go to class: they sit at home and buy a book. It’s so easy for them in a way, which is very weakening. They can’t get the human feeling from a book.”

3. Folk Music

Having grown up in a lively oral tradition, Johnny Dyani was obviously concerned about the transformation of jazz into a literate culture – and, even more, about its change from a functional music firmly embedded in a certain culture to an art music. If the jazz musician decided that he was an „artist“, Johnny Dyani couldn’t be bothered to call his music „jazz“. He wanted his music to be a people’s music, as he maintained time and again:

„I’m now playing with European and American musicians and I have opened up a lot. But so far I haven’t met jazz musicians who are also folk musicians. That’s what interests me.“

„I always loved folk music especially, although I was born and reared in a city. And today, I believe that every musician should realize and acknowledge that folk music is the backbone of every music.“

„I am a folk musician, and I don’t like to see my work described as jazz because it introduces connotations that I don’t regard as relevant.“

This self-distancing from jazz involves two aspects: the renouncement of jazz as an „art“ music – and the renouncement of jazz as an African-American culture. For while his early role models may have been American, Johnny Dyani, in the course of his self-search, discovered Johnny Dyani, the African musician. On records such as Rejoice or Music for Xaba, the connections with current American or European idioms of improvised music have become secondary.

What does it mean to be a folk musician, not a jazz musician? In the folkloristic approach, it is the instrument that shapes the player’s technique, not the extrinsic requirements of a musical idiom. In Dyani’s bass playing, especially in his soloing, there is no pre-conceived music that is being „transferred“ unto the double bass. While many jazz bassists
modeled their playing on saxophone or trumpet players’ lines, Dyani’s technique is as intrinsically “bassistic” as possible, in its strong orientation on the sonority of open strings and figures that lie “within the hand”. Making music in the folklore mode, however, implies that, in the end, the nature of the instrument is secondary. A folk musician will find a way of expressing himself using whatever is at hand. Witness Dyani, the pianist, Dyani, the percussionist, Dyani, the vocalist. One of the most moving documents of Dyani’s musicianship is his a cappella vocal duet with (drummer) Clifford Jarvis on *African Bass*.

However, as Johnny Dyani was to find out quickly, making music in the folk mode was something deeply foreign to most European players.

„When I came to Europe, I thought it would be very nice to hear musicians playing their folk music and assumed that everyone would be very proud of his folk culture. Then I discovered that a lot of musicians are technically so good playing ‘Giant Steps’ in and out. But when it comes to playing their folk music it’s like a skeleton moving, like in a clown without flesh. What can you do? Everybody is into the hip American music! It’s dangerous, especially for the young kids. They are without a musical identity because they ignore the folk music played by their elders.”

„That’s what I really miss here in Europe. There is no neighborhood music, which means that musicians have no relation to their neighborhood.”

As someone who had always experienced his music as part of a larger social context, as a music with a clearly delineated social function, Johnny Dyani could never become a European musician.

4. Music with a message

In the exile context, the social semantics of Johnny Dyani’s music inevitably took on a political note. Political on a larger scale, as the music of someone keeping a music alive that was suppressed in its home country, but politically also in subverting the musical codes of European culture.

„With my own band I can play this South African music I’ve been talking about. I can teach others how to play it which I feel is also a political statement when I try and let everybody feel it. Because a lot of musicians think that kwela music is very easy to play. But many musicians don’t have the appropriate rhythm and feeling. They all went through the schools of playing ‘Giant Steps’, etc. But ask them to play a simple line of kwela music and they cannot do it in a meaningful way!”

Dyani’s music questioned the Western fetishes of complexity and the avantgarde stance of European jazz musicians. Johnny Dyani had learned a lot from Europe. But he also realised that he could reciprocate by giving something that, to his ears, was deeply lacking in European Music. Johnny Dyani, an African Musician in Europe: a process of Call and Response.

Dyani’s music was anything but l’art pour l’art. And as if the music itself wouldn’t make that clear, the semantics of Dyani’s pieces were specific enough. These titling codes could be subdivided into four categories:


(b) homages to key figures of the South African resistance movement (e.g. „Lady Lilian Ngoyi“ (for Lilian Masediba Ngoyi (+1980), chairwoman of the African National Congress’ women’s committee), „Open Ballad to Mandela“, „Winnie Mandela“, „The Boys from Somafo“ (a college of the ANC named after the murdered ANC activist Solomon Mahlango), „Namibia“ (dedicated to SWAPO)

(c) atmospheric references to South Africa, its people, its regions, its culture (e.g. „Marabi Soweto“, „Kalahari“, „Grandmother’s Teaching“)

(d) adaptations of traditional South African Songs (e.g. „Tula Tula“ (a South African lullaby), „Imbomgolo“ (also retitled as „Angolian Cry“ and „Let My People Have Freedom“))

5. Multiculturality as a mutually enriching ensemble of differences: unity out of plurality
If you analyze the line-up of the ensembles Johnny Dyani led in the seventies and eighties, you will find an amazing mixture of South African, American, Turkish, North African, Caribbean, English, Swedish and French musicians – years before „world music“ became a commercial slogan. For Dyani, this multicultural blend was only a logical extension of what he had experienced in his formative years on South Africa’s East Coast. „Ever since I’ve had interracial bands because I believe in the unity of the universe. I had this experience in East London where all the tribes and races played together. So, when I came to Europe I found it normal to play with groups of French, Danish, Swiss musicians...“.

In his ability to reconcile differences, to shape unity out of diversity without obliterating individuality, Johnny Dyani’s music was as artistic model of a new, post-Apartheid, multicultural South Africa. And Dyani was well aware of this political subtext.

„I like to have a Frenchman, a Japanese, a Swiss etc. in the band. Now, everybody in the group has to understand me as a leader. My political view to the society is different from theirs and I have a struggle. That my music reflects this is only natural. Every member in the group has to contribute out of his background and views. So, it’s like an international family.“

3. Patterns: Some Basic Features of Johnny Dyani’s Music

In 1972, Chris McGregor spoke out.

„Music must have a rhythm. I’m fed up with this avant-garde that says you must have no time. I want a rhythm I can relate to because any move anyone makes has rhythm – some is graceless and some is informed by grace, but it’s the rhythm of life. People in Europe don’t identify with the drum or relate to drum culture and that’s a pity.“

And Dudu Pukwana maintained:

„You can’t play without time. Time is there, it’s natural, like day and night. There’s a drum inside you, while it keeps on pumping it keeps on living and that’s time too.“

The recordings Johnny Dyani made under his own name bear out that he shared this point of view. While Dyani frequently abandoned meter and tonality when playing in Free Jazz ensembles led by others (as demonstrated in recordings with Steve Lacy, Kees Hazevoet or David Murray), the music he called his own was generally firmly rooted, as far these parameters are concerned – as is most folk music, certainly South African traditional music. Another prominent feature of this specific musical culture is also highly prominent in Dyani’s playing and composing: repetition. Johnny Dyani might well be dubbed an ostinato magician for his ingenuity in inventing melodically striking and rhythmically driving repetitive figures. These patterns are generally one or two bars in length, often related in tonality to the pitches of the bass’ open strings (E, A, D, G) and form the primary building blocks of most of his pieces. Variety is obtained either by transposing the ostinato figures (mostly by a fourth or fifth), by juxtaposing sections with different ostinati or by alternating ostinato patterns and walking bass sections or rubato passages. Music examples 1-6 offer some characteristic examples of ostinato figures drawn from Dyani’s compositional output. It has to be added that repetition as a principle is also a salient feature of Dyani’s bass playing in a freely improvised context. Listen for example to the recording of the Detail group with Boddy Bradford, and you will notice how Dyani creates continuity in the free flow of the music through repeated motives.

Ostinati such as these form the basis for Dyani’s themes, infectious and memorable melodies of diatonic or pentatonic makeup, melodies clearly defining simple major or minor chords, melodies often voiced in parallel thirds or fourths – as in Kwela music or Township Jazz. The harmonic colour of this music is, in most cases, far removed from the „sophisticated“ soundworld of Bebop or Post-Bop with its emphasis on harmonic tension and ambiguity and rhythmical disorientation. Structurally, too, Dyani’s pieces avoid the formal clichés of pre-Free jazz, the standardized changes of Broadway tunes or blues changes. Dyani’s three-chord „Eyomzi“ (Zulu for „Home“, also known as „Johnny’s Kwela“) is a perfect example of this approach (music example 7).

Johnny Dyani’s choice of instrument was equally „unsophisticated“ by jazz standards. Dyani’s bass was one that many established players, who cherish old Italian, French or English instruments, would certainly frown upon: A cheap factory-made bass from laminated wood, a „junior size“ model named „Maestro Junior“ which its American manufacturer Engelhardt (the successor to the Kay Musical Instrument Company of Chicago founded in 1935 by Henry „Kay“ Kuhrmeyer) advertises today as „the perfect bass for the intermediate student“. The only significant change Dyani made to this steel-strung run-of-the-mill instrument, apart from the attachment of a pickup for amplification, was apparently the
replacement of the metal tuning machines with old-fashioned wooden tuners. Affordability and structural toughness were
certainly two factors supporting this choice of instrument. But there was more to it. When asked about the unusual size of
his instrument, Dyani explained: „I play it because of the sound. But it’s also more comfortable for me to play. Also a
small bass fits with my idea. I used to take my bass for a walk; people thought that was funny. [...] Now in Copenhagen
when people take their dogs for a walk at night I take my bass.“ 22 Surprisingly, this small instrument (approximately ½
size in double bass terminology) leaves nothing to be desired, as far as the sonority of the lowest register is concerned.
Dyani’s strong, punchy, focussed sound is of course primarily a testimonial to his forceful and determined plucking
 technique, but can also be partially attributed to the set-up of his instrument: the string action is extremely high, which
makes one marvel at Dyani’s ability to play rapid high-register figures and to sustain repeated patterns for long stretches of
time.

Johnny Dyani’s bass solos are also highly idiosyncratic, certainly by jazz standards. To begin with one of their most
startling features: Dyani never solos with drum or piano accompaniment. In order to make the true sonority of the bass
heard and not to be restrained by a fixed drum pulse, Dyani solos a cappella. Most of these solos are grounded by the
recurring sound of an open string, generally E, the fourth (lowest) string of the instrument. On this fundament, Dyani
weaves a colourful tapestry of pentatonic melodies, liberally making use of strummed double stops, plucked harmonics
and quick-fire excursions into the instrument’s highest (thumb position) register. Dyani also occasionally uses the (French
or German) bow, although his arco work is more „gestural“ than „cantabile“ in character: dramatic glissando shapes and
high harmonic textures rather than romantic bowed legato melodies (akin to Ornette Coleman’s use of the violin). Many of
these unaccompanied solos are quite similar in design, constantly recombining a familiar set of musical „phonemes“ – a
long-term work in progress well removed from the virtuosity of jazz bassists such as Scott LaFaro or Eddie Gomez, but
closer in spirit to the physical soloing of Charles Mingus, Jimmy Garrison or Charlie Haden.

There is no bass instrument in traditional South African Music. In a way, Johnny Dyani had to invent the „African Bass“
as one of his albums is called) – with a little help by the bass pioneers of Kwela and Mbaqanga music, the musics of the
South African townships of the Fifties and Sixties.

In the late Seventies, some new features surfaced in Dyani’s music. All of a sudden, there were „clean“ studio productions
with short, tightly arranged pieces; pieces, too, in which Dyani would play piano and delegate the (electric!) bass part to
other players – bass parts fairly rigid, meaning a loss of interaction in the rhythm section. The 1979 LP Together of
Dyani’s group Witchdoctor’s Son is a case in point. The motivations behind these changes were probably musical as well
as social. These productions may be regarded as an attempt to preserve the sound and spirit of South African popular
music in exile, as an attempt, too, to escape the hermeticism of the jazz circuit, and as a musical contribution to a new
socio-political context: the context of the growing Anti-Apartheid movement in Europe. In a way, this is functional music,
or, as Dyani explained: „I’m trying to keep up my people’s spirits at a time when there’s been so much unrest.“ 23 (Dudu
Pukwana’s band „Zila“ employed a similar strategy).

Of course, commercial pressures might have been at work, too, with the general disintegration of the Free Jazz scene.
However, it must be emphasized that there was no general stylistic change in Dyani’s music. The „popular“ approach
evident on albums such as Together was only one of many – as evidenced by Dyani’s work in the free improvisation group
Detail or his highly successful cooperation with „Great Black Music“ key figures Joseph Jarman and Don Moyé (Black
Paladins, 1979) or with saxophone fire-breather David Murray in the very same period. There was no way anyone or
anything could limit Johnny Dyani’s creativity.

4. Johnny Who?

South African Jazz, once prominent on the European scene, is virtually unknown today, even among musicians. And if
you mention Johnny Dyani’s name in his home country today, the answer is likely to be „Johnny WHO?“ Johnny Dyani
never managed to return to South Africa after 1964, and it is by no means certain that his musical legacy will accomplish
what its creator failed to do. The reasons for this saddening state of things are fairly obvious. The first, most profane and
most tragic: the early death of the protagonists of this music. Mongezi Feza died in 1975, Johnny Dyani in 1986, Chris
McGregor and Dudu Pukwana in 1990. Since this is not „paper“ music, but music which relies on the physical presence of
its creators, all attempts at keeping this music „alive“ via repertoire ensembles are problematic. A technically proficient
Coltrane imitator might at least sound „impressive“ – a Dyani piece covered by musicians not attuned to his spirit is
deemed to sound banal (although the quartet of trumpeter Harry Beckett, saxophonist John Tchicai, bassist Ernest Mothle
and drummer Makaya Ntshoko, an impressive gathering of ex-Dyani-sidemen, certainly came close to said spirit). A second
reason: the fact that a major portion of Dyani’s music was documented on small labels, labels often defunct now or
lacking effective distribution. (The fact that the music of South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, who records for well-
established labels, is very well audible in the concert of the jazz world, may serve as proof). Thirdly, the prominence of South African Jazz on the European Circuit was closely linked to the political context of the Anti-Apartheid-movement. With the creation of a New South Africa, this context has all but dissolved. There is no need for anti-apartheid hymns and functional music anymore.

Almost forgotten in exile and still far from home – the legacy of Johnny Dyani is undergoing a precarious fate. It is only to be hoped that efforts such as this book will help to redress the balance.

2 Ansell, 280 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 212]
4 Ansell, 279 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 210]
5 McGregor, 97
6 McGregor, 184
7 McGregor, 116
9 Solothurnmann, 45 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 219]
11 Ansell, 280 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 211]
12 Solothurnmann, 46 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 220]
13 Solothurnmann, 43 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 217]
14 liner notes to LP Song For Biko
15 Solothurnmann, 44 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 218]
16 Solothurnmann, 44 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 218]
17 Solothurnmann, 47 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 222]
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19 Solothurnmann, 47 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 221]
20 McGregor, 138
21 McGregor, 139
22 Ansell, 279 [Mbizo - a Book about Johnny Dyani, p. 209]
23 liner notes to Song For Biko