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Rocking Reconciliation: Karen Zoid's Model of Reconciliation for a Post-Apartheid Generation

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Abstract

South Africa has been actively pursuing reconciliation amongst its people since the abolishment of Apartheid and the first democratic election in 1994. However, inclusive practices based on racial and gender equality are still problematic. Popular music has a history of working at reconciliation, and rock performers like Karen Zoid have had success in bridging gaps between groups in South Africa. Artists who have successfully led music fans towards concepts like reconciliation, whether they are activists intentionally or not, can help promote inclusivity on stage and offer models for cooperation that thwart biases.

Key Words

South Africa, Afrikaans, Rock music, Reconciliation, Anti-apartheid

Introduction

> Research in the applied arts in particular has long characterized reconciliation as an experience of transformation and the implication of this is often that such transformation has positive, lasting effect. (Robinson, 2014, p. 279)

Popular music has a history of working at reconciliation though not all attempts have been successful. Dylan Robinson, in his article *Feeling Reconciliation, Remaining Settled*, considers some of the problems with the way reconciliation has been managed and why such efforts may have failed. However, even though some attempts fail, Robinson suggests music and performance can be productive tools for reconciliation. Inclusive music performances offer a shared space, or 'a visual and kinetic intermingling of bodies on stage, an acoustic blending of music, or a literary hybridization of languages' (Robinson, 2014, p. 277). Performances involving two different communities not only model cooperation when they perform together but they also offer a place where the audience can 'feel reconciliation's non-representational pull of resolution' (Robinson, 2014, p. 278). In essence, Robinson argues that audiences experience comfort through the familiarity and emotional connection that arises with the harmonic tension and resolution of the soundscape. In sum, he describes reconciliation as 'a structure of feeling and as a moment of positive sensory and affective experience that may engender both positive *and* negative consequences' (Robinson, 2014, p. 279). Music has the potential to instill a feeling of reconciliation when the listener is invested in the message.

When the National Party came to power in 1948 in South Africa, subsequently launching the Christian Nationalism Afrikaner movement, the racial divide became even more prominent. Although the 1994 democratic election in South Africa saw the end of Afrikaner Nationalist rule and the abolishment of apartheid, the post-apartheid generation needed reconciliation. South Africa boasts a rich history built on the nationalities of 'Indonesian, Madagascan, Khoi, Dutch settler and West African migrant' (SAHO, 2020) descent. Besides needing reconciliation from the perspective of culture and race, the post-apartheid Afrikaner community also suffers from remnants of heteronormative and heterofeminine values which were instilled by the previous patriarchal nationalist rule and cloaked under the guise of *ordentlikheid*[1] (Van der Westhuizen, 2018). A God-fearing Calvinist structure where the 'husband and father priest, school principal political leader [were all seen as representatives of] God on earth' (Vestergaard, 2001, p. 20) had implications for Afrikaans women in South

Africa as well. Marketed as *Volksmoeders* (Mothers of the nation), Afrikaner women were supposed to be 'the physical and moral reproducers' (Van der Westhuizen, 2018, p. 62) of the nation. Women were meant to keep the house in order, raise (white) children and look after their appearance, all in service of the men in their nation.

In music, as well as in society, this extremely conservative Afrikaner ideology came under attack. Rock musicians started to fight against conscription and by the end of the 1980s a movement called Voëlvry was established. Voëlvry (free as a bird) was 'a deliberate attack on the pillars of a conservative Afrikaner society that was facing an uncertain future as the apartheid's regime's rule was drawing to an end' (Van der Merwe, 2017, p. 121). This ultimately created the split between Afrikaans alternative rock and the norm, known as *Musiek en liriek* (music and lyrics), the foundation for today's Afrikaans pop music. This divide was also created on gender lines, with men in rock and alternative rock with only the occasional female *doo wop* singers. Women had their place in popular music, where they would sing about love, and 'perform the vanilla sexuality that goes with long bleached hair, perfect makeup, long manicured fingernails and tight, sequined blouses over figure hugging, belly-exposing jeans' (Hammond, 2010, p. 12). Gospel as genre was also an acceptable space for women to produce music in.

Karen Zoid, an anti-establishment performer and the first female rock celebrity in South Africa represented 'young Afrikaners seeking to distance themselves from the generations complicit in apartheid' (Hammond, 2010, p. 9). Zoid was subsequently labelled 'the voice of her generation' (Hammond, 2010, p.15) because she embodied the opposite of all the nationalist ideals found in other groups. Zoid is also an anomaly in the Afrikaans music world as her performative persona that gained her notoriety in 2002 was masculine. For one, she performed the ritual of smashing her guitar on stage, which Nicol Hammond describes as an 'act of political positioning' which in turn located her 'within the already passé tropes of international rock' (2010, p. 1) and it enabled her to appropriate the 'myth [of] authenticity'(Frith, 2007, p.137) deemed an important part of the rock genre. She used shock to gain an even stronger following with actions like arriving on stage in a *Voortrekker* (pioneer) dress and launching her song *Afrikaners is plesierig* (Afrikaners are jolly). As a female performer, her loaded lyrics and frequent collaborations with musicians from different race groups and music genres truly set her apart as a voice for a nation, in search of a new identity for South Africa.

In 2014, Karen Zoid, appeared on the television station, *KykNET,* touting her program *Die Republiek van Zoid Afrika* (The Republic of Zoid Afrika).[2] Seeming to step away from her more rebellious past, Zoid appeared as host of her new late night talk show interviewing a wide variety of guests who made an impact on the Afrikaans community. Guests consisted mostly of celebrities like actors, comedians, athletes, politicians, authors and business owners, people she deemed to have left their mark in South Africa and specifically in the Afrikaans community. The innovative episodes ended with either the guest's song or a song associated with the guest in a new arrangement led by Zoid. As Van der Merwe noted, old Afrikaans pop songs were reconceptualized through conventions of rock or metal, and orchestral songs were pared down to simpler forms, 'successfully bridg[ing] the uncomfortable gap between "pop" and "artistic" which has so often in the past caused friction' (2017, p. 141). Zoid's program also played an important role in valuing guests of different races, sexual orientation, and beliefs, ensuring diverse Afrikaans speakers are represented. Programs like *Die Republiek van Zoid Afrika* can foster mutual respect between citizens and also help shape the identities of young Afrikaans speakers who fully embrace the post-apartheid world.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

My understanding of Karen Zoid's show and its place within the Afrikaans community is informed by Michel Foucault's (1972) concept *discourse*, a set of statements that simultaneously form and govern *knowledge*. Discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p.135-140), therefore forming the meaning of the subject in question. I understand these practices to include the way songs import meanings and ideas and convey them to the public for their consumption. Foucauldian theory lends itself to the concepts of constructed identity within the fields of cultural analysis, identity studies, anthropology, and musicology.

I am also guided strongly by British sociomusicologist, Simon Frith's, theories on the value of popular music and the way it constructs identity. Frith (2007) outlines four social functions of popular music. Firstly, we use music for 'identity creation' (p. 144). He suggests that we need to look at genres to 'document the different ways in which music works to give people and identity, to place them in different social groups' (Frith, 2007, p. 141). Secondly, popular music helps us manage our relationships since we look to popular music to offer our 'boring

and banal [feelings in] numerous interesting and involving ways' (Frith, 2007, p. 141). Since 'most non-Western popular music also features romantic, heterosexual, love lyrics' (Frith, 2007, p. 141), I argue that it is important to note when musicians move away from these normative rules. Since music can trigger associative memories creating a sense of nostalgia, Frith (2007) labels the third function as 'memory shaping' (p. 142) that allows for audiences to feel emotionally connected to an artist. Finally and expanding on the first function is the function of possession which Frith (2007) argues has a great influence on a fan group since our possessions help us develop 'our sense of ourselves' (p. 143) and thus help us create our identity. What Zoid does and says on stage therefore governs what knowledge her listeners may gain. Frith's four social functions of music, identity creation, relationship management, memory shaping and something to be possessed, contribute to a semiotic discourse that can be observed within Karen Zoid's music and performance. My analysis of her program aims to establish the influence she has on her long-standing and new fan base.

Zoid has a history of writing lyrics that speak directly to the Afrikaans community. In songs like *Vonkelvrou* (Sparkling Woman), *Afrikaners is Plesierig* (Afrikaners are Jolly) and *Ek Soek Rock en Roll* (I Want Rock and Roll), she calls her female counterparts out on their heterofeminine behaviour. Song lyrics from *Dit Maak Nie Regtig Saak Nie* (It Doesn't Really Matter), *Yuppie scum, Goeiemore optimiste* (Good Morning Optimists) and In *Suid-Afrika* reveal her criticism of Afrikaans listeners who do not embrace reconciliation and who still fight for old-fashioned, conservative ideals. Her identity as a musician, which predates her creation of the talk show, is important in analysing the identity behaviours she wants to construct within her community. Clearly, by 'possessing' (Frith, 2007, p. 143) Zoid's music, her fans share the identity created through her music. Her sociological impact on Afrikaans listeners also reveals the power musicians have in a society.

Zoid had a well-established rock fan base prior to the launch of her talk show. Looking through social media of South African rock bands like Fokofpolisiekar and Karen Zoid, a visual of *realness* or *unspoilt*, *unedited true self* is portrayed. This reflects Frith's notion regarding rock music's dependence on this 'myth of authenticity' (2007, p. 137). Frith (2007, p. 140) mentions that due to the heavy metal experience being dependent on the need to experience the concert, fans are usually present in the music videos. Similarly, rock fans are regularly featured on band pages and in videos. Fans thus need to see the concert, and themselves within the genre. This is in stark contrast to pop and specifically Afrikaans pop

music. When viewing social media, Afrikaans pop/country imagery portrays the ideals of heterofemininity, ideals that were constructed for Afrikaner women during the Nationalist rule. In her book about Afrikaner women's identity Van der Westhuizen (2018) emphasizes the 'technologies of heterofemininity' (p. 62) employed by the popular Afrikaans women's magazine, *Sarie*, to instill the values of heteronormative lifestyles and relationships. As she makes clear, female worth vis-a-vis motherhood, beauty, and appearance (makeup, hair weight) is a women's moral responsibility. Fans of pop cling to their musical taste because it offers a window into their moral values and sometimes even their political stance. Supporting musicians like Steve Hofmeyr[3], who are outspoken regarding their racist ideals could show that you support these ideals therefor rock fans would ensure that they would not be mistaken for pop fans. In South Africa music has been utilize for many political purposes, including to further produce nationalistic ideals and can thus be 'perceived as both a marker and shaper of identity' (Hammond, 2010, p. 2) and many South Africans have used music as a more passive way of identifying as an Afrikaner.

Die Republiek van Zoid Afrika

With South African rock music's history of deviance dating back to the *Voëlvry* era, inviting audiences from all genres to join the conversation can still be of importance when working towards continued reconciliation. Season one of the show, *Die Republiek van Zoid Afrika*, featured eleven musical collaborations, and season two through six, featured thirteen musical collaborations. These artists come from different language groups and represent genres that can often be described as in conflict with one another. With each performance Zoid takes a majority stake at centre stage for the song. Two major themes found in the song choices over the six seasons are love songs (further referred to as *Love Category)* and songs of South African history (referred to as the *South African Category*). The love songs cover themes of romantic love gained and lost, love for friends, family and neighbours as well as loving oneself. The songs related to South African history portray stories of war, apartheid/struggle songs, reconciliation and being hopeful.

Love Category

The most powerful performances within the love category are Zoid's bending of heteronormative performance ideals. In songs like *Jessica*, *Voshaarnooi* [Fox-haired girl], *Groentrui* [Green jersey] and *Kort Donner* [Short bastard], the lyrics speak directly to a

woman being the object of a romantic love affair. Phrases like 'You can believe me Jessie, baby, there's no one else, this heart burns dream thoughts just for you'(Dylan, 2008), 'my heart blooms white for this fox-haired girl' (Van Resburg, 2005) and 'who's that short bastard at the corner always talking to you,' (Spoegwolf, 2012) are lyrics generally associated with the male subject. Zoid assumes the subject position and performs these lyrics either with the original singer or by herself without changing any of the language. Although perhaps not surprising in some parts of the world, in conservative South Africa, a woman who voices romantic feelings for another woman is understood as a challenge to the heteronormative ideals of many Afrikaans speakers. However, this does not mean that Zoid is openly singing about being gay. In fact, very little is known about her personal life other than having a son with an ex-husband. Rather, this act of singing woman to woman appears to remove gender from the performance. Importantly, it also confronts the autobiographical authenticity that is assumed for love songs.

Another aspect that normalises progressive ideas regarding gender is visible in Zoid's performances with female pop singers due to her avoidance of the tradition of women sounding like adolescent girls and her visual representation by stripping away the *pop image* associated with Afrikaans singers from the performances. Due to the harsh guttural quality of the Afrikaans language, many female Afrikaans singers countered this by imitating a child's voice and by supressing 'body resonance' (Hammond, 2010, p. 13) to reduce the masculinity of the language. This innocent, childlike sound, combined with a feminine, wardrobe and makeup choice, made these musicians the ideal product for conservative Afrikaans women to idealize. In songs like *Jy soen my nie meer nie* (You don't kiss me anymore), *Beautiful*, *The first time ever I saw your face* and *Ek verlang na jou* (I miss you), the pop star's usual image of modern feminine clothing is replaced with the plain black look. Usually brightly dressed singers like Sonja Herholdt and Lianie May both wear black pants and jacket combinations and Patricia Lewis and Demi Lee Moore sport all black outfits. Karen Zoid's voice also stands prominent in these performances through its opposition to the other voices. Femininity and visual appearance are thus downplayed bringing the voice and music to the forefront.

South African Category

Zoid's first episode featured a song she cowrote with her guest of the evening, Zolani Mahola, called *Troublemaker*. Zolani is the lead singer of the internationally acclaimed pan-African band, Freshlyground. The lyrics speak to former president Mandela and refer to him

as a troublemaker and peacemaker and praise his efforts for reconciliation. The lyrics, 'a country's pride is growing still', 'changes caused within one man' and 'you teach the world to love' (Zoid, 2015) speak to his lasting effect on a generation that still believe in his efforts of reconciling the nation. The repetition of the bridge 'highest praise to the rebel' also reflects the anti-establishment nature of rock music that rebelled against the 'songs of the past' (Zoid, 2015). The choice of song by itself says much about where she positions herself in a post-apartheid world. Moreover, the modeling of her with Zolani on stage creates an inclusive music performance that speaks to Robinson's theory that shared space can be emblematic of reconciliation (2014). Evoking the memory of the first black president in South Africa, the love he had for the country and sharing the stage with a non-white, non-Afrikaans speaker, was not what a *typical* Afrikaans audience was expecting. In season three, audiences saw Zoid delivering a rendition of *My African Dream* accompanied by singer-activist, Vicky Sampson. This performance can also be interpreted through Robinson (2014), as an example of 'a primary site' where the audience feels 'reconciliation's non-representational pull of resolution' (p. 278). That evening's incorporation of Sampson's song and the conversation with law professor and Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela, left a lasting impression on South Africans who took to social media to exclaim their feelings. The song clip from that episode had gathered more than 250 comments from people from all walks of life and racial groups. People showered Madonsela with praise regarding her work in protecting the people of the country and the message of having a united South Africa was newly appreciated after the performance with Sampson.

Karen Zoid's performance with internationally recognised singer, humanitarian and teacher, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, in season five, received the same praise as with Vicky Sampson. The Shona[4] song, written with the Zimbabwean wars in mind, *Kana Uchema* (When you cry) describes in the simplest of terms, that we feel what those around us feel. The lyrics 'You and me, let's share the land, it's my wish to see you smiling' (Chaka Chaka, 2006) also point to ideas of feeling reconciliation (Robinson, 2014). The lyrics 'your hair and skin are like mine' (Chaka Chaka, 2006) suggest that interracial fighting is not the answer, but rather bridges can be built to allow people to understand one another. Once again, a non-Afrikaans song was a hit amongst Afrikaans viewers just like the earlier collaboration with an Afrikaans singer received support from a non-Afrikaans audience. In an interview about her presence on the show, Chaka Chaka said:

> When I was invited, I thought 'but this is in Afrikaans. How many Afrikaners know Yvonne? I felt bad because it was a Shona song, but I was so surprised. She sang so well. I had gooseflesh. In fact, we had one rehearsal and when I got there she knew all the words and was very impressed… It is not something that you would expect and even when the song first aired, I was in Tanzania reading tweets about myself in Afrikaans. My notifications were going, and I thought 'What have I done?' I also didn't understand a lot of the Afrikaans so some of my Afrikaans friends were calling me to tell me what was being said. (Zeeman, 2018).

Karen Zoid's show not only normalised the unity of different cultures on stage but also shared her platform for other musicians, not traditionally seen in this platform, to receive praise. Artists from different genres, languages or cultural backgrounds share their stories and gain acceptance by a wider audience. Besides praising the performance and singers, white audience members took to Facebook to exclaim how amazing it was to be able to listen to Yvonne's story of inspiration and come to know someone the listener had only heard of in passing. The posting of the song garnered a hundred comments of support from South Africans, again from all backgrounds, expressing their amazement and appreciation of both the music as well as the performers.

In season two, Zoid is joined by Vusi Mahlasela whom she first played with in a tour in 2011. Vusi was one of the musicians performing in the 1994 inauguration of President Nelson Mandela. The chosen song, *Weeping* by Dan Heymann from the South African rock and funk band, *Bright Blue*. The band fused American and British pop with mbaqanga[5] (Martin, 2013, p.159) which in itself speaks to the notion of reconciliation through a mixing of various genres and their attendant identities. The original song referred directly to the political issues during the 1980s and incorporates melodic parts from the banned anthem of the African National Congress, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* (God bless Africa). Importantly, the same anthem was used in creating the new national anthem of South Africa.

Here Zoid's own words are important in understanding the significance of the song as well as the significance behind awarding someone a chance to tell their story:

> There's a lot of political things happening in the music scene, Steve Hofmeyr has made some extremely weird statements…and playing victim. Hey, you're not a

> victim… people need to be aware, a wonderful thing about working with Vusi is, I don't believe in trying to be political and I don't want to be an activist and start campaigning for anybody but just working with Vusi, and taking him into the Afrikaans community has been the most transformative thing ever, because he tells his story, Vusi, 47 of his friends were killed in front of him … his mother died, she was a domestic worker, he grew up in Mamelodi[6], I mean its hectic. It's so difficult to make a start if that's your childhood… and for some reason Afrikaners don't realise that. Most of them don't… I just wanted to say something. (RSSA, 2012).

Zoid's experience working with Vusi was transformative for her but sharing her experience with him a few years later on a more powerful platform, allowed her to offer the opportunity for transformation to a much larger Afrikaans audience. Yvonne Chaka Chaka said after her performance with Zoid that 'Music is not about entertaining anymore; it is about educating.' (Zeeman, 2018). Sharing these moments with others offer unique opportunities of learning for all who listen.

Of course, not all her guests necessarily share Zoid's views. Steve Hofmeyr, as guest, caused controversy in South Africa based on appearance on the show after his racist social media claims. In an interview Zoid was asked why she brought him 'to the table' and she responded:

> The idea of my TV show is to have conversations with people that have made a mark in South Africa. Steve certainly fits the profile. I knew many viewers would be disappointed, confused or outraged that he was a guest on the show. But I knew everyone would watch, and that is what happened. Highest viewership of the program so far. I think it is important that we stay in conversation with people from different religious, sexual and political orientation than ourselves in this country. How will we grow or understand (love) if we boycott each other? I wanted to illustrate with the program (Evita Bezuidenhout[7] was my second guest on this particular episode) that respect is the cornerstone of comfortable communication. To me communication is the first step to change and/or growth in a society. (Ciolfi, 2015).

Zoid does not actively take on a role of activist or a role of condemning artists around her. She creates a platform, conducive to creating a discourse around the political and social

issues still plaguing a country, 26 years after democracy. By creating a visual soundscape for audience members and listeners combined with these subtle acts of humanity, she is able to generate an understanding and connection amongst groups, still slightly removed from one another. Afrikaans people are not freed from the burden of apartheid, but they are offered the opportunity to take part in reconciling the nation.

Final Thoughts

On 16 December 1995, Nelson Mandela said 'reconciliation does not mean forgetting or trying to bury the pain of conflict… [it] means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice' (NMF, n.d.). That day, December 16, became the *Day of Reconciliation*, a public holiday in South Africa that marks the end of apartheid and promotes reconciliation and unity. In her interview with *Rolling Stone* in 2012, Zoid was offended by an interviewer who asked whether Afrikaners should simply forgive and forget. She responded:

> It's the line that all Afrikaners use, can we not just forgive and forget… the fact is, we can't. The people who are saying those things have never been to Soweto[8], they've never been to flippen Khayelitsha[9], they don't have a clue, you know, what people are going through today … I hate hearing that: can we just forgive and forget, and move on. (RSSA, 2012)

By using her own status and power as performer, she offers audiences the chance to appreciate art from different genres and she creates a space for performers of colour, not always afforded in the past.

In 2020, the Nelson Mandela University's Centre of the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (CANRAD) awarded Karen Zoid with an Adjunct professorship as part of its expansion of research and engagement activities. She was acknowledged for her work within South Africa beyond the music she produces. Reconciliation, transformation, change, inclusivity and representation, are all the ideals sought for when South Africa entered into democracy but none of these can happen without active engagement from all parties involved. Restoring relationships and finding a place for all within the country is paramount. It is important actively engage in activities that fight against the structural inequality still present in South Africa. Zoid's efforts to normalise respect, understanding and recognition amongst people from different races and gender identities within our entertainment and recreational activities help to make them tangible.

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[1] Ordentlikheid (decency) is a loaded Afrikaans term, coined as a descriptor of Afrikaans women, by researcher and author, Christi van der Westhuizen. The weight of the Afrikaans word gets lost in translation but her book, *Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in post apartheid South Africa*, does a great deal to explain this phenomenon.

[2] Play on words. Zuid Afrika (ZAF) was the Dutch spelling before it became South/Suid, Eng/Afr respectively

[3] Steve Hofmeyr made headlines in 2014 by tweeting that "Blacks were the architects of Apartheid" (news24, 2019) amongst other tweets.

[4] Language native to South Africa's bordering neighbour, Zimbabwe

[5] Danceable gospel style with rural Zulu roots

[6] Mamelodi, meaning mother of melodies, is a 'township' or urban settlement in Pretoria set up by the apartheid governments Group Areas Act, designating it as a 'blacks only' area.

[7] Evita Bezuidenhout is the 'alter ego' of author, satirist and social activist, Pieter-Dirk Uys. His female alter ego is based on the character *Dame Edna Everage* and he used this character under apartheid to highlight the absurdity of the then government causing a lot of his work to be censored.

[8] Soweto, home to the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976, is another 'township' or partially informal settlement in Johannesburg created in the 1930s as a segregated area for black people to live.

[9] Khayelitsha, a 'township' in Cape Town, is second largest after Soweto.