This paper is concerned with the South African jazz composer Abdullah Ibrahim and the uses of memory in music that he wrote in 1970s South Africa. Through an analysis of blues and church hymnody as musical signifiers in Ibrahim’s piece “Mamma”, the paper shows how Ibrahim’s compositional language at the time was embedded both in his personal experience as a musician and in the experience of many of his listeners. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s notion of “sites” that embody the “presence of absences”, the analysis extends to an argument that the climate of memory in which music was written in the 1970s – a time when the absence of social normality in South Africa and the exiled status of many musicians, including Ibrahim himself, created a dislocation of space and time experienced by many people – was a site in which a shared “space of memory” was created. In this space, nostalgia for a lost past, both personal and political, could also give rise to the imagination of what at the time was still an almost unimaginable future after apartheid.

... more powerful a stimulant
than voice or music,
the smell of a grass fire touches memories
of what we have not yet experienced

Abdullah Ibrahim is well known in international jazz circles as a South African composer–bandleader who came to prominence in the 1960s and ’70s with music that linked the world of Duke Ellington, Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker to the urban soundscapes of Cape Town and Johannesburg. Absorbing a recognizably South African flavour into an American genre, Ibrahim was noted in the early days as the bearer of a new style – African bebop – alongside his more celebrated colleague, Kippie Moeketsi (see Martin c. 1995, Coplan 1979,

1 I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge, and the Council of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, during the preparation of this paper; thanks also to friends and colleagues, particularly Roger Parker.
2 From Don Maclellan’s Notes from a Rhenish mission, Poem 31 (p.22), and used with his kind permission.
and Coplan 1985:190–2). Ibrahim later became known for his high-profile cultural role in the anti-apartheid movement, and he is now regarded as something of a legendary figure in South African music. He was born Adolf Johannes Brand in Kensington, Cape Town, 1934, and until his conversion to Islam in 1968 worked professionally under the name Dollar Brand. His work has generated a substantial literature (see Rasmussen 2000:229–37), although very little of it may be regarded as critical in a scholarly sense.

Ibrahim began his career in the 1950s and continues it to the present, but it is through music of the 1970s and ’80s that he is best remembered – music that is for many people, especially South Africans, “vintage Ibrahim”. What he wrote in the 1950s and ’60s was largely formative, while what he has done since the early 1990s has radically changed direction. Some of Ibrahim’s recent work, *African Symphony* and *African Suite* for example, involves orchestral collaboration that has taken his music into the concert hall, where a new symphonic reimagining of his music has changed the jazz voice of the past into a quite different “cultural utterance”, to use Bruce Johnson’s term (Johnson 1993:10).

Rasmussen (2000) is the authoritative source for information about Ibrahim’s recordings and performances from 1954 to 2000.

Ibrahim’s early style characteristically experimented with harmonic and rhythmic dissonance, unpredictable phrasing, piano colour and contrasting register: see “Blues for Bea” (*Dollar Brand plays sphere jazz*, 1961), “Knight’s night” (*This is Dollar Brand*, 1965) or “The aloe and the wild rose” (*Confluences*, 1968). The whole album *This is Dollar Brand* says very clearly, in fact, who Ibrahim was in 1965: a pianist après Thelonious Monk who combined American and African styles or blended sentiment with irony (as in his treatment of the ballad “On the banks of Allen Waters”). By the end of the 1960s Ibrahim had settled into a jazz discourse that was rooted in modernist pianism, drawing on images of both Africa and America through evocative titles (*African piano*, 1969; *Peace*, 1971). Changes occurred in Ibrahim’s style from the late sixties to late seventies, and without wishing to draw a simplistic parallel between “life” and “works”, there is clearly a connection between these changes and his unsettled life at that time. The constant shifting between South Africa, Swaziland, Europe and the United States has often been decoded with a politically glossed truism. Thus, as recently as 2001, Maya Jaggi wrote:

After a spell in Swaziland Ibrahim returned to live in Cape Town in 1973, definitively embracing his musical roots. The peak of a creative outpouring was *Mannenberg – Is Where It’s Happening* (1974), inspired by the Cape Flats slum where many of those forcibly removed from District Six were sent … The album went double gold in the country and remains an unofficial national anthem. Soon after Soweto, and only days after organising an illegal ANC benefit concert, Ibrahim fled the country with his wife and two young children, vowing not to return before free elections were guaranteed. Settling in New York, he openly joined the ANC and the regime cancelled his citizenship: “We were cut off from the country”.

Jaggi (2001)
More important, perhaps, than the sense of political sacrifice promoted on the surface of such writing is the implication between the lines of a fractured personal life. The music of Ibrahim bears testimony to this, above all to the fostering of a heightened awareness of identity with place and the need to develop a notion of South Africa as “home”. The name Ibrahim has given to successive ensembles from the 1970s on is “Ekaya” (Xhosa = “home”), and home is a recurring motive both in his many interviews and in texts associated with his music (titles, liner notes, occasional lyrics). In 1976 Ibrahim went into exile, a word inadequate to denote the cruel act of distancing that gives poignant resonance to expressions of cultural belonging. In exile an uneasy psycho-physical continuity was severed, and in order to continue it symbolically and artistically – perhaps also out of sheer self-defence against the alienating environment of New York – some reconnection with “home” had to be made. One obvious way of doing this was by evoking the power of memory, using the past to create an anchor that had both a spatial axis (South Africa the place) and a temporal one (South Africa the past). Thus, his music of the 1970s makes more overt use of marabi, swing, dance music, carnival, blues, hymns, gospel and spirituals than it had done in the 1960s, and additionally it brought gestures from Sufi traditions with which he was surrounded as a child but to which, as a newly converted Muslim, he reconnected on a different level. A powerful sense of the use of music in recalling the past in order to survive and define the present, in exile, is reflected in his poem “where loneliness still waters meet nostalgia”. Written from the perspective of his new home in New York, the author speaks eloquently in this poem of the way memories of music from his childhood sustain him through the grim reality of a life “hemisphered” – a life, as he puts it, “neither here nor there” (Brand 1970 (1966):298–9).

This paper is concerned with issues of remembering: not so much what Ibrahim is remembered for – this would necessitate an entirely different approach that relied heavily on oral testimonies, accounts of audience response – as what uses he made of memory in the construction of his musical language. By referencing the past in musical ways, I suggest, Ibrahim generated a space – for himself and, more importantly, for his listeners – in which anything, including a utopian future, could be imagined. There are two cautions, or limitations, that I would like to throw around this suggestion. The one recognizes that all music operates within the sphere of memory: compositional unfolding is itself embedded in time and in most styles of composition sounds remember themselves at various points along the soundways. The other acknowledges music as a collection of signifiers that bear associations of all kinds among listeners, associations obviously drawn from individual memory. To make any meaningful statement about Ibrahim’s particular application of memory, then, I focus on one piece of music rather than discuss his music in general. That piece is the tune “Mamma”, and I will come to an analysis of it later.

3 Information on these and other South African music genres can be found in various publications including Coplan (1985), Ballantine (1993) and Allen (1999). Short definitions of a number of South African musical terms are also given in the South African concise Oxford dictionary (Kathryn Kavanagh (ed.); Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002).
Using the past to create an imaginary time-place is an act not only of memory, of course, but also of nostalgia, and herein lies one of the major theoretical problems of this paper. It is an issue of directedness. For South Africans older than one generation (twenty-five years), memories of the political climate of 1970s South Africa are very different from memories experienced at that time, memories with strong cultural, social and individual resonances that helped to sustain and shield people (in all kinds of ways) from the intolerable present. My concern here is not with some kind of nostalgia for times past (times that were highly problematic for the majority of the population) but rather with the way music resuscitates a whole climate of memory – in this case, the climate in which Ibrahim’s music operated in the 1970s, a climate that has now largely disappeared. In directing my thoughts towards this space the word “memory” seems in some ways more suitable than “nostalgia”, the latter so much the more complex emotional signifier in the South African context. Theoretically, then, I am on the horns of a twofold dilemma of reception: addressing a non-South African and South African readership simultaneously despite their very different acquaintance with certain memories, and trying to show how such memories are embedded in music as it was rather than is.

The space of memories that Ibrahim created in the 1970s was sociopolitical as much as it was personal or autobiographical. Here I include myself in the equation, experiencing his music from my first encounter (1976) onwards, not merely as a place of free association with my own past but as a specific South African terrain reflecting – and indeed articulating – the tortured political climate of 1970s and ’80s South Africa. Above all, and extending over a period of several years, the music seemed to me to give voice to my own anxiously hopeful political position. As white immigrant South African working in a liberal university environment, outside the discourse of Black Consciousness but sympathetic to it, disgusted with the apartheid regime yet compelled to stay in the country and address it, I found in Ibrahim’s music that longing for something better – that “imaginary”, the new nation – that perfectly expressed my troubled position. This I later identified as the use of memory that I discuss here. I found it present in his work of the 1960s, but after 1970 it became increasingly inscribed for me as a sonic embodiment of on-going political dissonances within South Africa.

Ibrahim’s listeners in the 1970s were culturally diverse and geographically scattered: audiences in jazz clubs abroad; South Africans who attended his rare and soon-to-be-legendary performances at home; exiled South Africans who heard him in clubs, concerts, embassies or anti-apartheid rallies abroad; people everywhere who bought his recordings as a political as much as musical gesture. His reception differed from one country or group to another – it was not the same in Paris and New York, London and Johannesburg. Live concerts outside South Africa were often tinged with the emotion of loss felt by the many exiles listening. “I cannot forget how the audience left after the concert … red-eyed from tears of emotion” wrote William Patry after the Nyon Festival concert of June 1979 (Patry 1983 (1979)). On the other hand, it could be emotion recognized but not shared. Reviewing Ibrahim’s Water from an ancient well (Roots
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Record Co. ROH112/Tusk, 1988), Ben Watson of Wire magazine comments: “Ekaya pack an emotional weight that some jazz aficionados find embarrassing or vulgar … Moving, but a history lesson nonetheless” (Watson 1990, 56).

Reception of Ibrahim’s music was complicated by other factors, including different release dates of recordings at home and abroad, the difficulties of finding suitable South African venues under South Africa’s “Separate Amenities” Act, and some degree of censorship in the distribution of his recordings.4

For people living in South Africa, political and cultural isolation increasingly skewed the view of Ibrahim away from “international artist” towards “icon of liberation”. His concerts, both at home and abroad, became rallying-points for articulating the motif of resistance. The heterogeneity of his reception allowed for multiple interpretations and multiple intersections of style, memory and association. His tunes of the late 1960s and early ’70s, through which he had secured an international platform, were heard overseas within the framework of jazz at that time, while to most South Africans this avant-garde style was less comfortably familiar than marabi, kwela, carnival or mbaqanga, or the American swing music of the 1940s to ’60s to which they had become accustomed (see Ballantine 1988 and 1999).

One could push the argument a little here and contrast the “two sides” of Ibrahim’s music of the 1970s and ’80s in harmonic and rhythmic terms: the more contemporary and international his style became, the further it moved away from chords I, IV and V (the mainstay of much South African popular music since the early 1900s due in part to the influence of nineteenth-century hymnody) and predictable metre. But one could also push it the other way and say that for some people the American-ness of the music was what made it familiar in South Africa, while in the jazz clubs of Europe and north America Ibrahim’s African roots made the music identifiably “different” from American mainstream. Such a reception history does not make for a neat or unproblematic telling, for in each place where his music was received (whether Cape Town or New York) something of the music of the other place was part of what was recognized – an international interconnectedness not unique to this music but nevertheless unusual in its time, a time that predates the globalizing nature of world music.

This double identity was useful. The cutting-edge, forward-looking musician who “came from somewhere” enriched the language of international jazz – through Ibrahim’s role as a musician rather than as symbol of resistance. Ibrahim’s work as an international jazz artist is not what I am primarily concerned with here, however. What interests me is the potential for the other side of this identity to remember the past while rooting itself in the struggle for a new political order. Since the changes brought about by a new democratic governance in April 1994 have taken effect in South Africa, it has become possible to

4 Censorship in South Africa operated largely through state radio and parastatal recording company control of music. The absence of lyrics in much of Ibrahim’s music, although it did not guarantee free circulation, meant that it was “not as susceptible to media industry control” (Coplan 1985:194).
combine these two views and see Ibrahim more broadly as a musician who played a defining role in national culture akin to Ellington’s in the US – a prolific composer and legendary performer who was a major “voice” in defining national history – but here I take a particular view of how voice was constructed at that time. (As the ANC’s armed struggle against totalitarianism intensified, most South Africans were concerned with surviving the present rather than defining it, and were not “looking back” with hindsight.) Ibrahim created an affective mode of expression, I suggest, whose denotative power depended on shared associations among listeners from very different (South African) backgrounds. And it did so through evoking the power of memory.

There are probably any number of Ibrahim’s tunes through which one could trace the workings of this power, but “Mamma” – which exists in two recordings, one for solo piano and one for ensemble, although not Ibrahim’s best-known composition (of those from the 1970s most people would probably choose “Mannenberg”, “Soweto” or “The wedding” – uses the tug of memory perhaps even more effectively. It does so, I suggest, because it is composed in the tradition of a generic and widely significant medium, the spiritual or hymn, in tandem with conventional blues form.

Originating from the late 1960s (Pasmussen 2000:10), “Mamma” first appeared on record in 1973 on an album called African sketchbook. Musically, 1973 was a productive year: seven albums appeared, most of them containing the word “Africa” in the title – including African sketchbook, recorded in Switzerland and produced in Germany. This solo album (where Ibrahim plays

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6 My source for African sketchbook is the version held at the Eleanor Bonnar Music Library, University of Natal. According to Lars Rasmussen, the bibliographic authority on Ibrahim’s work, “Mamma” was “[o]riginally part of Anatomy of a South African Village [1965], but not included in the recording of that suite” (Rasmussen 2000:172). It was recorded again in late 1968 or early 1969 at the SABC Studios in Johannesburg (Rasmussen 2000:33), then for Swiss Radio in 1969 (34), appearing on the albums African sun (I), Ancient Africa (I) and Fats, Duke & the Monk (39, 42, 49), and was later recorded at a session in Switzerland in April 1973 (51) – all apparently before African sketchbook was released in 1973. The African sketchbook version is the one to which I refer in this paper, together with a later version for ensemble (African marketplace, 1979). The year of release of African sketchbook is not quite clear: Rasmussen gives it as 1969 (34), but on the LP cover the date 1973 is given. These kinds of difficulties have made Rasmussen’s task a painstakingly difficult one (see Lucia 1999/2000). The most likely scenario is that the music for African sketchbook was recorded for radio in 1969 and released on LP in 1973. Rasmussen’s list of tunes for the recording session (34) differs slightly from that on the LP, which rather supports this view. Rasmussen’s list is Air, Khoisan, Peace–Salaam–Hamba Khale [sic], Slave Bell, The Stride, Mamma, Krotoa, Machoppi, Tokai, The Dream, The Aloe and the Wildrose (The Aloe and the Wildrose–South Easter–Sadness), Tariqua (1), Nkosi, Selby That The Eternal Spirit Is The Only Reality, African Sun, Nkosi, African Sun, Peace–Salaam–Hamba Khale. On the LP there is no Khoisan or Selby …; African Sun only appears once (after Nkosi); there are different spellings – Kroto and Tariq – and “Salaam” is in the order Salaam–Peace–Hamba Khale (Kahle here correctly spelled). On both versions “Mamma” appears on a medley between “The Stride” and “Kroto[a]”.

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piano and flute) is rich in references to his Capetonian past, particularly in tunes such as “Salaam”, “Slave bell”, Tokai”, “Tariq”, “Nkosi”, “African sun”. The back cover carries a short poem by Ibrahim (“In the darkness”) next to a fragment of his music in score; on the front cover part of his face is shown in close up, obscured by darkness, next to his name “Dollar Brand/Xahuri”. In the middle of a medley of tunes, a stream of musical consciousness that itself is like a memory of previous performances of the tunes, appears “Mamma”. The piece is thus set up, as it were, for its role as mediator with the past.

In the first phase of its reception this piece addressed a South African audience that had been locked into a network of laws and practices that governed every aspect of life: upbringing, school, education, entertainment, where you lived and with whom you would “normally” speak; a Foucaultian grid of surveillance second to none. Cultural difference was inscribed as racial difference, which paradoxically meant that biculturalism in the sense outlined above (American and African music conjoined in the aural memory) did not officially exist. School history was rewritten as the history of Afrikaners and British; millions of people were uprooted from places where their families had lived for generations. An acute dislocation of place and identity resulted in the development of the need for an imagined past embedded not in national or regional history but in personal memory. The present was a suspended sentence, and an overwhelmingly future-orientated discourse gradually gathered momentum during the 1970s and '80s in all forms of cultural representation, including poetry, visual art, fiction, drama, film and academic writing.

The experience of such dislocation was an important part of what Ibrahim’s music articulated and partly explains, I think, the significance of its reception. It resonated directly with those fractured “realms of memory” (Nora 1996) that constitute the past from which people had become culturally severed. How did it do this? The music itself is unassuming and unaffected, as my transcription of the 1973 recording shows (Figure 1).

There are a number of things one can say about this kind of document, aside from making a structural analysis on the score showing how harmonies, motivic cells and quotes are used (which I expand on below). Most obviously, it is not a jazz lead-sheet but a full transcription, which I made many years ago after repeated listenings to both the 1973 and 1979 recordings. It bears some relation to the score published in 1997 (see Schweizer 1997:32–3), but I deliberately do not use that score here, preferring to present the piece as I experienced it on record at that time. It thus functions somewhat as a piece transcribed “in the field”, struggling to be the kind of ethnographic average that captures the essence of a performance. It represents adequately enough the pitches and chord voicings heard on the recordings, but it does no justice at all to the rhythmic elasticity of Ibrahim’s 1973 performance. One can nevertheless treat it as a text as we can most jazz or ethnographic transcriptions, with the proviso that it is simply a study-score, a record of something complete and in the past. Neither

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7 Rasmussen’s translation of Xahuri is “a small bird” (San or Nama-Damara: see Rasmussen 2000:225).
the sketch for improvisation that jazz tunes usually are, nor the frozen moment of wild abandon that transcriptions of jazz improvisations embalm, my transcription serves here as “the tune”. But even with this caveat, “Mamma” is clearly not a jazz tune in the ordinary sense. It is played with almost identical harmonization and chord voicings from verse to verse and from one recording to the other: surely, then, a set piece rather than a skeleton tune to be fleshed out. It is as if ways to treat the tune are deliberately restricted, and perhaps this is what Ibrahim intended, for he recalls in an interview that hymns and spirituals were always “played more or less the same” (outside the context of jazz) “because there’s not much you can do to a spiritual except sing it as it is” (quoted in Palmer 1985:21).

Another obvious thing to say about the piece – as it is – is the way its chords are rooted in church hymnody. Their voicings come from a pianist’s sense of keyboard geography, never far from the imagined distribution of voices in a choir. “Mamma” could be any congregational hymn of the late nineteenth or
early twentieth century, as found in the black American Alexander hymnal for example. It is the kind of tune and harmonization Ibrahim heard frequently in his childhood in the American Methodist Episcopal Church where his mother played the piano (Palmer 1985:21). It has an eminently singable melodic line although there are no words (on the 1973 recording Ibrahim hums along reminiscently as he plays), and one or two arching leaps mark focal points of the tune’s AA’B structure. The harmony includes the kind of chromatic inflection used in nineteenth-century hymns – substitute chords or “secondary dominants” enhancing the primary triads I, IV, V to which the harmonies are tied by a kind of centrifugal force.

There is a sense in which I, IV and V have been bleached of meaning by overuse in hymns, folksongs, rock, pop, gospel, blues, marabi, kwela, and by subjection to the reductionism of harmony exercises. These “clichés emptied of whatever communicative power they might once have possessed”, as Susan McClary puts it (2000:3), hold great significance here, however. For one thing, they embody a particular meaning for Ibrahim – “chords I (Heaven), V (Earth – V7-Mother pregnant with the Child), IV (The Child)” (A brother with perfect timing 1981) – a meaning that links them metaphorically to the idea of mamma/mother. Although this cosmology of the harmonic family may seem to some as clichéd as the language of “Mamma” itself, the gesture facing us here is not a cliché, not a regurgitation, but a reconsideration: not, as Richard Middleton has observed in connection with such usage, so much a “deformation of mastery”, a subversive use of the “low-other” of Western music (2000:78) but a kind of remastery. Put another way, it can be seen as an essence, a residue of the syntax of centuries of encounter between English, Dutch, German and North American hymns and psalms and indigenous music, where chords such as I, IV, V have dissolved into the vast complexity of a gradually modernizing Africa. Victorian hymns, psalms, choruses and part-songs co-opted by the colonized, reconstituted, defamiliarized, and used in a variety of new compositional ways and cultural scenarios.

As indeed here. “Mamma” is more than a hymn embodying the history of South African music that uses I, IV, V; it is a kind of collective memory, its cloring, homey style connoting family, church, identity, a certain respectability. The traces of two well-known hymn tunes on the surface of the music – from Samuel Sebastian Wesley’s “The Church’s one foundation” (end of the first phrase of Wesley and Ibrahim – see Figure 1), and Lewis Redner’s “O little town of Bethlehem” (last phrase of Redner and Ibrahim – see Figure 1) – reinforce a connection with Ibrahim’s childhood. Despite his conversion to Islam in 1968, still in 1973 Ibrahim makes direct reference to hymns sung in the African Methodist Episcopal church community in which he grew up in the 1930s and ’40s. These quotes are not random, but important signifiers from the past. Ibrahim discusses

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“O little town of Bethlehem” on film (A brother with perfect timing, 1981) and “The Church’s one foundation” in a radio interview (“Abdullah Ibrahim: a self-portrait”: Radio South Africa, 1991). The progress of such hymns down the years to communities such as Ibrahim’s can be briefly recounted thus: “The Church’s one foundation” came to the Cape Colony with the first Wesleyan Methodist missionaries in the early nineteenth century, and “O little town” originated in Massachusetts and was introduced to the Cape during the period in which the highly influential (black) American Methodist Episcopal Church was established in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (Campbell 1995).

What Ibrahim does not mention is the significance of the text of these hymns, which must at some stage have been grasped as metaphors for survival and resistance. Words like “Yet saints their watch are keeping/Their cry goes out ‘how long?’/And soon the night of weeping/Shall be the morn of song” (“The Church’s one foundation”) would have the same kind of resonance for black South Africans in the 1970s as the texts of spirituals did for American slaves in the nineteenth century. Such embedded meaning is explored in McClary’s portrayal of the way cadential formulae from hymns and spirituals were used by black Americans: “they don’t reject them as a way of affirming their individualism ... they use the norm to reinscribe the cultural habits, the structures that preserve both community and communication” (McClary 2000:24). The cadential phrases in “Mamma”, by the same token, do not signify closure, control. This is not an extended piece like “Mannenberg”, so one cannot argue here, as Richard Middleton does for Ibrahim’s use of I, IV, V in the later song “Mannenberg”, that “closure is rewritten as process, cadence as endless chain” (Middleton 2000:77); but the sense in which these chords are used is the same, and one can certainly read them as projecting a “sustained present”, undermining conventional tonality’s “tendency to strain for and against closure” (McClary 2000:28).

The key to Ibrahim’s “decentring” or “remastery” of a hymnic chord progression lies partly in his treatment of it as jazz. Yet, on the 1973 solo recording of this piece Ibrahim’s style of playing is not immediately obvious as a jazz tune. He begins tentatively, the music sounding as if it were being remembered, or remembering itself: “traditionally everything was remembered”, comments Ibrahim in one of his interviews. “The notebook has messed up our memory ... What I do is more like ... crystallising an experience. It’s like a seed growing in the dark” (Ibrahim quoted in Palmer 1985:20, 21). The seed grows into a 12-bar tune that Ibrahim plays four times over without any variation or improvisation beyond an increasingly syncopated rhythm. In a sense he becomes the organist, the listeners his congregation. The way he intensifies emotion from verse to verse as an organist would – gradually “thickening” the sound (through rising dynamics in place of registration) – is reminiscent of congregational practice rather than jazz. One place of memory that Ibrahim established here, then, is the church and all its associations with family histories, traditions, community practices, congregational singing, rituals and symbols of all kinds. Above all, the “place” is not only a building or an institution, it is a remembered community, recalled in sound; and as with Ibrahim, so for many listeners in the 1970s: it was the sound of childhood.
“Mamma” is hymnodic in its presentation of stanzaic repetitions, harmonies and chord voicings, yet it is not a hymn in structure. It is a twelve-bar blues, displaying the classic structure of three lines of four-bar material and an overall AA’B form. The “ideal” abstract harmonic pattern of blues chords, one per bar (I – I – I – IV – IV – I – I – V – IV – I – I) is followed fairly closely by some chromatic embellishments, as the following comparison shows (embellishments shown in brackets). Note the two moments where chord V is used as more than mere embellishment (indicated in italics):

**Classic blues structure**

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**Structure of “Mamma”**

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The first line of “Mamma” (A) is tonic-based – a tonic reinforced by skirmishes with other chords. The second line (A’) is related to the first melodically while deviating harmonically – beginning in the subdominant, then moving back to tonic. The third line veers between dominant, subdominant and tonic. Such a pattern is recognizably that of the blues, however freely treated.10 Two moments when the classic blues chord sequence is interrupted – bars 2 and 11 where chord V is given in italics on the score – are the opening and closing phrases of the tune where, for example, in a hymn one might find an imperfect (I–V) or perfect (V–I) cadence: these are the moments, one might say, when the language of hymning takes over from the language of bluesing. The syncopated rhythm of “Mamma’s” opening motive articulates the rhythm of the word “mamma” (pronounced as one would say “mother” – and another obvious realm of memory).

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10 Ibrahim’s loose interpretation of the blues – sometimes much looser than in the case of “Mamma” – is a hallmark of his style. See for example “Blues for Bea”, “Blues for His Majesty King Sobuza …”, “Carnival”, “Good news”, “Gwangwa”, second section of “Kippie”, “Knight’s night”, “Moniebah”, “Thaba Nchu”, or “Tinti(n)yanana”.

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Ibrahim’s melody bears little trace of the blues scale ("blue" notes where they appear at all are relegated to grace notes), but is rather carved out of his store of hymn memories. One notable feature of it is the use of a descending motivic cell – G–F–E-flat – which on the transcription presented in Figure 1 I have indicated as a three-note cell (x). It has three different harmonizations, and its four placings in the melody occur in four very different rhythmic (dis)guises, as shown in Figure 2.

This “horn-call” figure is so woven into the fabric that it is hardly noticeable, yet it links the three lines of the tune. It underpins the opening cadential progression of bars 1–3, but in bar 4 and bars 8–9 it cuts oddly across two melodic phrases, seeming to fall out of the fingers on to the keys. Such a motive (mediant falling to tonic) is a stock-in-trade of much tonal music, including hymns and blues. It can perhaps be viewed here as a remembering device since it operates without our being very aware of it, shifting its position within the phraseology and submerged below the more striking surface of syncopated harmonies – offering, albeit in heavily compressed form, an example of what Scott Burnham has recently called music’s fundamental reliance “on the repetition of its own past events as a means of gaining coherence” (2000:655).

Listening to the 1973 solo recording, one is alerted to one further aspect of “Mamma”: its rhythm. Ibrahim plays the tune within a continuous sequence or "collage" (Mellers 1983), in his customary solo style. It emerges cautiously out of the previous tune, as if Ibrahim is piecing it together fragment by fragment from a store of memories. The ending dovetails into the next tune where another side of the composer altogether is revealed: a plunge into something darker, more dissonant. As “Mamma” begins, then, the sense one has is of being taken on a journey, the rhythm coming into being under Ibrahim’s fingers as they slowly recover “lost time”. The tune solidifies into the metrical average (my transcription) only from the third verse. This arrival brings with it a certain feeling of regret, and by the close it has become imbued with a profound sense of loss. In this sense, the piece is not so much an embodiment of nostalgia as a journey towards nostalgia. This is not merely an impromptu recall of the past, unsolicited, surprising us with the force of “unanticipated recollection” (Botstein 2000:535); we are taken there. More than this, the past is not only Ibrahim’s personal past, or the past of Cape Town or of South Africa’s bruised history; it is an ideal past that the listener is invited to share, and one that we can share because it is an imaginary, archetypal terrain, the lost domain of childhood, inscribed
through the title of the piece as the unimaginably sweet and forever unattainable
realm that embodies the genesis of our being.

We are talking here about a symbol: “mamma” as security, sense of being,
utopian place. Memories of individuals, collected through oral testimonies – the
approach of oral history and ethnomusicology – would in terms of this paper
only tell us what Ibrahim is remembered for, and I have already said that I would
not explore that here. It is Ibrahim’s evocation of collective memory, in the sense
of memory as history, that I am exploring through this piece: his way of drawing
listeners into a social participation where music functions as a mnemonic device
for recalling the subjectivity of a shared experience.

How memories are shared may be a social phenomenon, how they are
formed a neurobiological one: but in both cases a cultural dimension is present,
since “the brain does not work with information but with meaning”, as neurosci-
entist Stephen Rose puts it; and the work of meaning-formation is “a historically
and developmentally shaped process, expressed by individuals in interaction
with their natural and social environment” (Rose 1992:91). My argument is this:
memory – the past – is evoked through Ibrahim’s music and becomes present.
But it is not the real present, the “cruel reality” of Ibrahim’s poem, the fractured
society of 1970s South Africa. The presence of the past that music evokes is
much freer than this, much less chained to time and place, beyond the control of
political surveillance. It can be whatever the listener wants it to be, and it is here
that the performative element becomes crucial. Ibrahim as performer-composer
had a very powerful agency to aid the process of memory-formation. Audiences
at live concerts were not simply passive listeners; they shared in an act of
remembering. This was particularly true of his solo concerts in South Africa,
where, typically, he would play for 90 minutes to two hours without stopping,
weaving together the collage of tunes that I referred to earlier, often in an
atmosphere charged with emotion. The axes of time and space across which
memory worked became blurred: music, the focal point where the axes cross,
offered an uncontaminated site where the process of remembering and imagin-
ing could blossom.

This site, even while filled with sounds, held at the same time a conscious-
ness of certain absences. Michel de Certeau has put this beautifully in his essay
“Walking in the city” (2000). Reading the city of Manhattan as a text (from,
poignantly now, the 107th floor of the World Trade Centre), Certeau uses the
notion of “sites” to describe the patchwork of roads and buildings below him as
a psychic as well as physical network. The buildings are “sites that have been
lived in … filled with the presence of absences” (Certeau 2000:104). I offer this
fuller extract from Certeau as analogy to Ibrahim’s use of memory:

What appears designates what is no more: “Look: here there was …”, but can
no longer be seen. Demonstratives utter the invisible identities of the visible:
the very definition of the site is, in fact, to be this series of movements and
effects between the shattered strata of which it is formed and to play upon
those shifting levels … Every site is haunted by countless ghosts that lurk
there in silence, to be “evoked” or not … such ghosts … neither speak nor

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see. A kind of knowing has fallen silent. Only whispers of what is known but is silent are exchanged “between us”. Sites are fragmentary and convoluted histories, pasts stolen by others from readability, folded up ages that can be unfolded but that are there more as narratives in suspense … What is memorable is that we can dream about a site. In any palimpsestic site, subjectivity is already articulated on the absence that structures it like existence, and the fact of “being there”, Dasein.

(Certeau 2000:104–5).

The most immediate image from this rich description is, for me, the Heideggerian notion of “being there”. The absences Certeau refers to, in terms of the experience of Ibrahim’s music, allowed connections to be made – psychological connections with place, family community. The subjectivity of the past is irretrievable: “How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early adulthood vanish beyond direct recall!” as Benedict Anderson puts it; and, since they cannot be “remembered”, they must be narrated (Anderson 1991:204). Music is one such narration. It offers a structure that appears whole; it makes “being there” (Dasein) possible, gives the listener a sense of identification with place that is dependent not on place itself but on time, since being there in the Heideggerian sense implies a temporal rather than a spatial ontology. Space gives time a precise visual representation, so remembering places – Mannenberg, Soweto, New York – seems easier than remembering dates, but the act of remembering is rooted in temporality. In this sense, however cruel, exile is not a limitation. What Ibrahim is hemisphered by is his separation from the past: in the case of “Mamma”, the remote past of his childhood. What he creates in this piece is a narrative held in suspense by a convergence of past and future, an existence in both, in Heidegger’s notion of Dasein, which makes possible the ideal future through the act of listening to the ideal past.

This use of memory is not, however, a plot. Ibrahim can only be conscious of so much: using certain musical residues, his audience, the way he plays, distance from home, from childhood. He brings memories into being not through the self-conscious act of composition but through enactment. Memory comes through performance – extended to a wider listenership through the recording studio, but still performance. In his poem Ibrahim describes memory as a cure for nostalgia – a “narcotic”. Is this all that “Mamma” is – an illusion, blotting out the pain, a necessary fiction to survive the present? I would argue not. There is more than merely an invitation to recollect implied in Ibrahim’s music, more than a simple indulgence in nostalgia in the harmonies, voicings, colours, melodic language and musical treatment, the recall of hymns and blues, the title. The music feeds off an immense sense of loss – reaching back into the past through denotations of tropes such as the hymn, gospel, spiritual, slavery, the church, the blues, motherhood – but it is not merely a familiar tune used in a communal context (not merely “Abide with me” sung at soccer matches); it is a familiar generic type: hymn-blues. This allows it the freedom to become a site for imagining the utopian dream of South Africa after apartheid, to be part of the future. Perhaps the important thing is that “Mamma” addressed an audience at
that time and place – the South Africa of the 1970s – which desired to be the viable sociopolitical community it had not yet become. The affective hearing of music like this in the 1970s relied on contexts that nurtured beliefs in the solution of the future.

The 1979 jazz ensemble arrangement of “Mamma” offers a different gloss on the nostalgia: perhaps because it is for ensemble, the beginning of a new community; or perhaps because the tune has been reconsidered in the years between 1973 and 1979, it is more ironic than the earlier version. The album on which it first appeared – African marketplace – achieved greater popularity than African sketchbook, probably because Ibrahim’s career had leapt forward, and perhaps also because political events had worsened (the Soweto student revolt of June 1976 came midway between the two versions) and more international attention was focussed on South Africa. By 1979 Ibrahim’s music was more assertively political, a quality that intensified in the 1980s. Yet this “Mamma” begins in the same way, tentatively, within a narrative style of “once upon a time”. There is an introduction – perhaps a preface since it points no way ahead – where fragments of a chord progression are played with interjected trombone until finally the tune begins with a sudden change of key from F to E-flat.11 Although the tune is no longer part of a collage (the collage technique was invariably reserved for solo albums), the introduction to “Mamma” (1979) captures something of the reminiscing nature of the solo version. The effect of this preface is similar to the slow unfolding of memory at the beginning of the solo version, but here earthy trombone replaces churchy piano. The way the instruments are played, roughly and a bit out of tune, brings a more rebellious view of mother, “blue in inflection, dirty in tone” (Mellers 1979). It takes us into the streets, and in this more public sphere come memories of marching bands – the New Year Cape Carnival, perhaps, or the Salvation Army. A new level of irony is manufactured – brass bands, military bands, funerals, civic pomp. As the dynamic level rises through the (same) four stanzas one perhaps becomes distanced, aware that the music is beginning to overstate its meaning. This version even sounds conservative in the context of Ibrahim’s cutting-edge style of the late 1960s and early ’70s.

What is the change, the difference? South Africa’s history between 1973 and 1979, and Ibrahim’s relation to it, is part of an answer. But this is the same piece, almost note for note the same harmonization, as the “Mamma” of 1973. What it seems to do is comment on the previous nostalgia, in particular on the inertia and impotence of that nostalgia. While the earlier version functioned to unveil a glimpse of utopia, the 1979 “Mamma” reminds us that such utopias are fiction. Perhaps, it seems to say, Ibrahim’s purposeful regression to childhood, to a mythical Golden Age, presented a vision that could not be sustained. It was of necessity based to some extent on a denial of social reality, as documentary evidence of South Africa’s far from utopian urban squalor in the Cape Town of the 1930s and ’40s shows.

11 In Schweizer’s songbook this is presented as “Part 1” of the tune “Mama” [sic], “Part 2” being the E-flat tune.
This paper has mainly been concerned with music’s agency, through uses of memory, both to reflect and construct a temporary collective identity in the past. It touches on music’s ability to construct an identity of the past, but doing this – remembering through a piece such as “Mamma” from the perspective of the early 2000s – would be a very different project, inherent in which is the danger that music always becomes politicized afresh. As the “memory industry” (Klein 2000:127) gains momentum in South Africa, though, there is enormous scope for such reconstructions, revisionist history in school curricula and museums of memory being two of the most obvious examples.

The recent discourse on problems of memory-making in South Africa, articulated in, *inter alia*, Nuttall and Coetze (1998), Leggasick (1998) and Norval (1999), concentrates on text and image, largely failing to take into account the powerful agency of music. Bringing to light new evidence of the way that music was practised and identities were formed in South African jazz and popular music throughout the twentieth century is yet another process, already well under way (see, for example, Coplan 1985 and 1998, Ballantine 1993, Erlmann 1996, Baines 1997, James 1999, Allen 2000). What I offer here is an instance where collective memory was evoked in the past through music that acted “as a sort of Proustian mnemonic … giving access … to moods and memories, thoughts and worlds that seemingly had been completely lost” (Sacks 1996:19). Music such as this functions today to remind us of the past as heroic struggle, desire for community, of the hope and hopelessness out of which culture under apartheid operated, of pain numbed by the power of musical evocation, and of the places of memory that music provided.

**References**


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