

Primary Source: Excerpts from Miriam Makeba's Memoir, 1987



Excerpts from Miriam Makeba's memoir: Miriam Makeba with James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New American Library, 1987). The following selections were excerpted from throughout the book. They come from pages 78–79, 83, 90, 94, 96–98, 100–101, 111–113, 212–213, and 244–245.¹

Setting: Abroad from South Africa, mostly in the United States, between 1959 and 1987

Becoming a Celebrity

[In 1959], Lionel Rogosin writes that two years after he finished filming, *Come Back, Africa* is being screened for a few critics, and they are very enthusiastic. They all ask who the girl is in the cabaret scene. Mr. Rogosin insists that I join him at the Venice Film Festival ... When we get to Venice ... I decide to go out for a walk. I do not get far before something strange happens. People begin to follow me. A few at first, but soon a whole crowd ... I learn that these people are fascinated by me because I am African ... I stand out ... For the big screening tonight, I wear a Western-style, strapless dress made out of a stretch material that is very tight. It is the fashion. Mr. and Mrs. Rogosin and I have to walk down this long passageway, inside and out, that takes us from the hotel to the cinema. It is lined with people, both sides. I cannot believe it, but they are waiting to see me! As we pass, they begin to shout: "Africa! Africa!"

1. *Makeba* is one of two autobiographies of the singer. The other is Miriam Makeba and Nom-sa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (STE Publishers, 2004).

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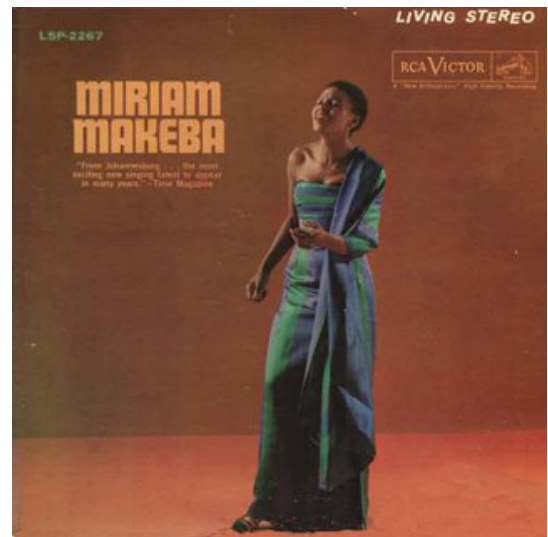
[After the festival] we go back to London, where I am to wait for a visa that will permit me to enter a place I had once only dreamed about: America. I first see America through the window of an airplane. I expect it to be big. It is ... In two days I have to be in California to do the *Steve Allen Show*.² And they tell me I am to open at the Village Vanguard³ here in New York in five days ... There was a bohemian feel at the Village Vanguard. Students would come on Sundays and sit on the floor when I sang. Black customers were much fewer than the white customers, who came out of curiosity or were students studying Africa ... They come to hear the African girl. They are not disappointed, because they have not seen anything like me: I don't wear any makeup. My hair is very short and natural. Soon I see other black women imitate my style, which is no style at all, but just letting our hair be itself. They call the look the "Afro" ...



The Village Vanguard, one of the jazz clubs Miriam Makeba regularly performed at while in the United States in the early 1960s.

On my way back home, I pass the theater where Lionel Rogosin's film has opened. I cannot believe it when I see the marquee: "COME BACK AFRICA, STARRING MIRIAM MAKEBA." I am surprised, because I am only in the movie for three minutes.⁴ People say they go to see it expecting me, and they wait and wait. Finally, I come on, sing two songs, and I'm gone. But I am happy if my name will bring people into the theater, because the documentary is an important look at the terrible conditions we live in at home.

[In 1960, my first] album is out, and people all over the country are buying it. The excitement of the Nationalist Movement in Africa has spread to the United States, and more and more there is an interest in things African. I find myself right in the center of this interest. Big Brother says I am a "diplomat"⁵ ...



The cover of Miriam Makeba's self-titled first album, Miriam Makeba.

When I return to New York with Bongi, several days have passed and must hurry to obtain my visa.⁶ I have certainly missed my mother's funeral ... but I can at least visit her grave and see my relatives.

2. *The Steve Allen Show* was a popular prime-time variety show that filmed in Hollywood and aired on Monday nights in 1959. It was a version of the late-night talk shows that are still on TV today.

3. A popular jazz club in Greenwich Village, New York City.

4. Although Makeba says three minutes here, her segment is five minutes (1:07–1:12).

5. "Big Brother" is Makeba's affectionate name for the actor and civil rights icon Harry Belafonte. Belafonte supported Miriam's career and served as her de facto agent while she was in the United States in the 1960s.

6. Bongi is the name of Makeba's daughter and only child. She lived from 1950 to 1985.

I am nervous when I get into the South African consulate. Here I am once again nothing but a native black without rights. The darling of the American newsmagazines and music industry, the girl who charmed the New York sophisticates and started a fashion trend with her hair and clothes, here she is just a *kaffir* who doesn't know her place.⁷ The man at the desk takes my passport. He does not speak to me, but to himself when he says, "Miriam Makeba," as if he was expecting this moment.

He takes a rubber stamp and slams it down on my passport. Then he walks away. I pick up my passport. It is stamped "INVALID." For an instant my breath catches in my throat as I realize what has happened. They have done it: They have exiled me. I am not permitted to go home, not now, and maybe not ever ... They are displeased with me. I have gone too far. I have become too big ... I have not said a word about politics in all the newspaper stories that have been printed about me. But I am still dangerous.

Making Connections Abroad

[In 1962], I am in Atlanta, Georgia, in the American South, and my party is the first group of blacks permitted to stay in this hotel ... But when Mr. Belafonte, Julie, I and some other people go down to the restaurant for our dinner, we are not allowed to go in.⁸



Makeba featured in the March 30 1968 issue of Billboard magazine as a trade advertisement for her song, "What is Love?"

"Coloreds," we are told by the maître d', "are not permitted."

"Oh, oh," I think, "here we go again." A new country, but the same old racism. In South Africa, they call it apartheid. Here in the South, it is called Jim Crow.

Mr. Belafonte is very composed. He tells the manager coolly, "I'll be back."

And he comes back. But this time he brings reporters from every paper and camera crews from every television station with him. He brings me along, too. I stand at his side at the entrance to the restaurant when he makes a statement. "What can we as Americans say to a guest like Miss Makeba? She comes from a land of oppression, only to find a situation like this."

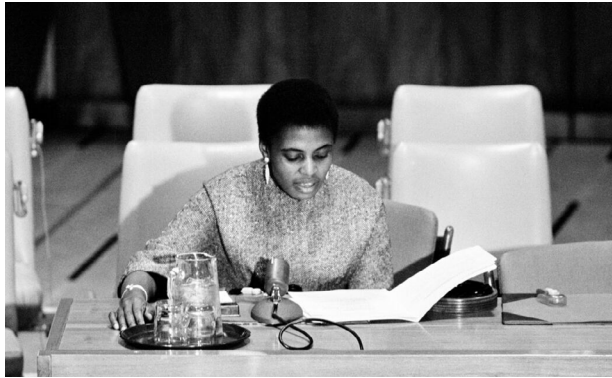
I understand why Big Brother made me go down to the restaurant the second time for the cameras. I admire the civil rights movement here in the U.S. ... When you come to think of it, the treatment of black people in the U.S. is quite similar to the treatment of my people in South Africa. In the U.S., black people live in segregated areas that are not called townships but "ghettos." If you are black, you cannot live where you want, or go to whatever restaurant you like, or sit where you want on a bus. To me, it's the same thing in both countries ...

7. "Kaffir" is a racist and profoundly offensive term for a Black person in South Africa. It is equivalent to the n-word in the United States.

8. Julie Robinson was Harry Belafonte's wife from 1957 to 2004.

Using My Platform

[In 1963], I sit all by myself in the center of a long conference table, and I speak to the eleven members of the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid ... I go before the Special Committee, and before the entire world, and say all that is in my heart about the war Pretoria is waging against my people.⁹ I am very nervous ... What I am about to do will be considered an act of treason by Pretoria. I think of my family who are back home, and how they may be harmed by this ... But it is for them, and for all of us, that I must say these words.



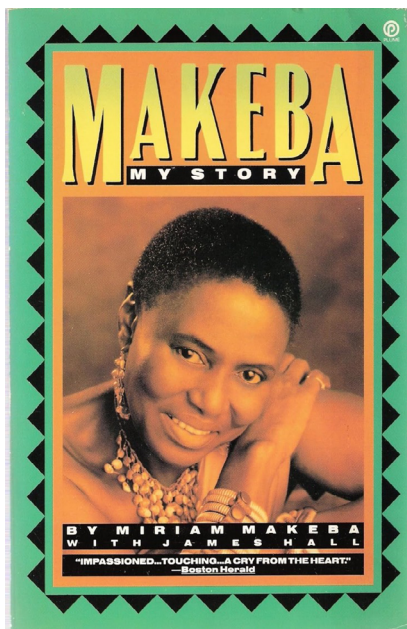
Makeba testifying against Apartheid at the UN General Assembly on 9 March 1964. Makeba testified on several occasions in the early 1960s.

“Most of the world’s big powers have only paid lip service to the appeals of my people for help. Therefore, I must urge the United Nations to impose a complete boycott of South Africa. The first priority must be to stop the shipments of arms. I have not the slightest doubt that these arms will be used against African women and children.”

I sit back in my chair, feeling drained but excited. At last I have spoken out!

Afterward, I tell the press, “I am not a politician or a diplomat.” I am just a singer, I say. But in South Africa, when the authorities learn of my testimony, I become something else: a criminal ... I am guilty of condemning the murder of my people.

And my punishment is swift: From now on all my records are banned in South Africa. It is illegal to sell my old records that I did for Gallotone and any of my new U.S. albums I do for RCA.¹⁰



Cover of Miriam Makeba’s memoir, written with James Hall in 1987. Makeba had been living in exile for twenty-nine years at that point.

Why I Continue

In South Africa, my niece is stabbed to death. Her boyfriend kills her in a fight. Because one black person has killed another black person, the crime is not taken seriously by the white authorities ... Within a year, my last sister in South Africa, Mizpah, dies ... I had not seen her since I left home. I cannot go to her at the time of her death. Even getting news to me about her is difficult. Because I am who I am, I cannot allow my relatives to write me directly or phone me. This would put them in jeopardy. With Mizpah gone, Joseph is my only brother ... And the last two are separated by – what? ... That hateful system.

9. The city of Pretoria was the administrative and executive capital of South Africa during Apartheid. Makeba uses the word as a synonym for the Apartheid government.

10. Gallotone was the record label that represented Makeba in South Africa. RCA refers to Radio Corporation of America, Makeba’s US record label starting in 1960.

I cannot stop thinking about these things ... But instead of making me tired, all the motion makes me realize that I have a job to do, a purpose. I am not running away from anything, but towards something: toward a day when the world realizes, through voices like mine, that there is a terrible evil among all people that is dragging us down and must be stopped. I am not a vengeful person, but I know there is a political system that must answer for the murders of my relatives and ancestors. My message is my concerts. This is how, days after the death of my grandson or hours after a divorce has gone through, I am on stage, and all that people see is the good feeling I have being there to sing to them¹¹ ...

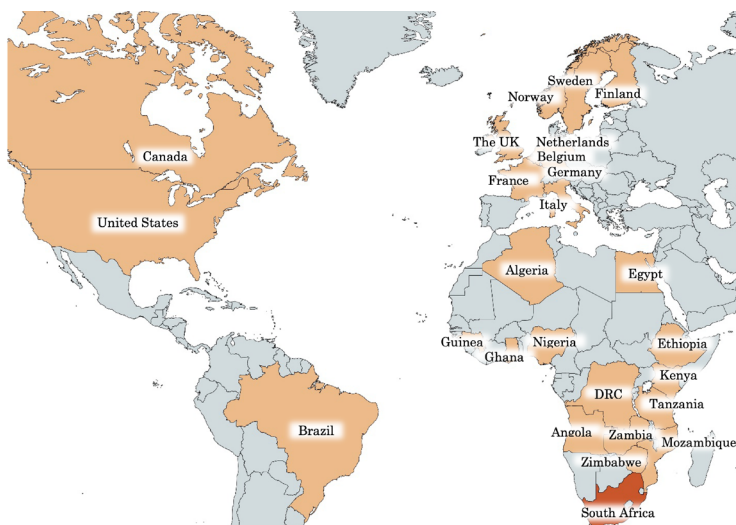


Miriam Makeba performs in Stockholm in 1969.

Four days after Bongi's funeral [in 1985], I had a concert to do ... I asked myself why, when I was so tired and so discouraged? It was because singing seemed the only way to keep the pain and the numbness away for a little while. But more than the happiness of performing was involved. My daughter died because she lost her mind in exile, and to avenge her death and the deaths of so many of my family and my people I must continue to speak out against the racism and murder that makes bloody and foul my home. I say very, very little on stage, just a few words at most. The people come to have a good time and enjoy themselves with African music. They do not come to be lectured, which is good, because I am not a speaker. Mostly, just the fact that I am there at all, that I have survived, is testimony enough that there is resistance towards Pretoria. Maybe a thousand people at a time see me and learn things. It is not much, but it is the best I can do. This is the way I will defeat the great evil, and this is the way I will save myself.



Makeba at the annual Grand Gala du Disque in Congrescentrum, Amsterdam, March 7, 1969 (above); and a map of some of her performances around the world (below).



11. Makeba refers here to one of her daughter Bongi's children, Themba, who died as a young child in 1979. Makeba was also married several times in her life, and here she is referring to her divorce from American civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael, also named Kwame Ture, with whom she separated in 1978.

Image Citations

Page 1:

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Page 4:

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Page 5:

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Devin Leigh, Map of Select Countries Makeba Performed in, made by author in MapChart, 2024.