

Punk in Africa – Three Chords, Four Countries, One Revolution

*“Black punk rockers smoking dope with hope to cope
White punk rockers keep their head and fight for peace to rule”*
(“Black Punk Rockers” by National Wake, lyrics by Khoza Brothers)



Punk in Africa will focus on the pivotal role of punk rock music, style and subcultures in recent and contemporary political and social upheavals as experienced in four African countries: South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Kenya. In all three of the three Southern African societies, the punk movement played out against a rapidly intensifying backdrop of intense political struggle and open civil war; today in Kenya, a continually developing punk scene plays out today against a very similar level of societal breakdown, financial difficulty and political turmoil, while a parallel scene in the Afrikaans community uses punk as a medium to express questions of identity, belonging and political dissatisfaction.

The story told in the film covers several decades, from the early 1970s until today, and will trace the relationships and unique features of the punk scenes in the various countries with a strong focus on the central role of the punk movement in the anti-apartheid, anti-censorship and anti-conscription struggles in the three major South Africa cities. Particular emphasis will also be placed on the unique multi-cultural and multi-racial nature of the movement and how this has influenced its political direction and African sense of self-identification until today.

The film will immediately open by establishing questions of African identity within the punk contemporary punk scene in South Africa, leading into an animated credit sequence which will combine visual elements of the internationally identifiable punk rock style and uniquely African art and urban design, set to a newly recorded version of the classic political anthem “Black Punk Rockers” originally done by South Africa’s first multi-racial band, National Wake.

This opening sequence will directly flow into the main narrative, which is primarily concerned with the political and social impact of punk within the anti-apartheid movement. This begins with a visit to South African rock legend Benjy Mudie, who explains the first stirrings of punk in Africa in the early 1970s, from early music-inspired riots to the direct anti-government campaigns of the 1980s. Through the stories of bands directly forged by this repressive environment, such as Suck, National Wake and Asylum Kids, we examine the development of punk rock as played out in Johannesburg’s underground music scene during the 1970s and 80s, a story set against the backdrop of the Soweto Uprising, international sanctions and border excursions into Angola. This will be emphasized by interviews with some of these musicians, including founding members Gil Gilroy of Suck and Ivan Kadey of National Wake, as well as archive materials demonstrating the political atmosphere of the time and extensive use of rare and largely unseen Super 8 films and extensive photos of all three of these pivotal and influential bands.

By the mid-1980s, this growing underground scene was exploding in all of the major South African cities and taking an overtly political stance. The film will explore this in great depth, beginning with a visit to Durban and an interview with confrontational Coloured punk rocker and media provocateur Rubin “Wildman” Rose, one of the key figures of the 1980s underground scene as drummer in the legendary band Powerage. Numerous period fanzines and footage of early 1980s protest concerts will also be included. Others from Durban to be interviewed include Dianne Coetzee, a veteran of the local underground punk

movement and now of Billboard Magazine, and members of the politicised all-female band Leopard and Sibling Rivalry, one of the multi-racial ska-punk bands to emerge in the 1990s.

Similarly, a visit to Cape Town will investigate how the underground organisation and distribution of this protest-oriented network functioned within the state of emergency of the time, through an interview and extensive use of the archive of local punk legend Ernie Pap, as well as tracing the emergence of the first mixed-race “goema punk” band The Genuines, with testimony from founder Mac MacKenzie and producer Warrick Sony of the Kalahari Surfers. This section of the film ends with an exploration of the peak period of political struggle in late 1980s South Africa as experienced directly within the punk movement, when the anti-apartheid and anti-conscription campaigns intersected with underground music in semi-clandestine and racially mixed venues like the Johannesburg club Jameson’s. This will be told firsthand through the personal stories of the banned and harassed group Toxik Sox, long-time punk promoter and historian Bill Botes, and X-Ray and Neil, brothers from the Indian community of Lenasia who produced one of the era’s most important underground fanzines, set against an archival background of riots, police actions and UDF protests.

With the advent of liberation, negotiations and democracy, the punk movement in Southern Africa became less overtly political in orientation but more and more diverse socially, with increased freedom of travel allowing movement across borders. In South Africa this gave root to bands focused not on pure protest but on exploration of identity and mixed musical forms, often drawing on local indigenous traditions. The film will examine this primarily through Cape Town ska-punk band Hog Hoggidy Hog, formed at the time of the first free elections and today playing increasingly African-influenced music as South Africa’s longest lived punk band. This part of the film will feature extensive road trips to both Mozambique and Namibia, where the origins of those scenes and their political context will be explored, alongside contemporary issues: in Windhoek, members of the younger band Half Price explain the local situation through songs concerned with German-speaking identity, human rights and satires of the 2010 World Cup; in Maputo, drummer Paolo Chibanga of 340ml explains the development of the Mozambican punk scene in the immediate post-civil war era and the unique local sound, rooted in reggae, Brazilian and traditional African music as approached through alternative rock music.

The film will conclude with a survey of the rise of openly stated identity politics within the contemporary punk movement, moving across both borders and ethnic and class lines. This section will dwell less on archives and instead will feature several bands playing live to today’s socially aware and often politically frustrated youth, with trips to Pretoria and Nairobi in order to examine the contemporary (and exploding) developments in the Kenyan and Afrikaans underground scenes, both of which point to new horizons and directions within the African punk identity. At the film’s conclusion, we return to Johannesburg to examine the newly formed Afro-centric punk band Swivel Foot, who incorporate kwela and township elements in their sound as part of a fiercely felt multi-cultural identity as new South Africans. As they prepare to travel to play at an all-African festival in Swaziland, the band members return us to our main theme, present throughout – an examination of what it means to be committed, punk, and African, in a time of political challenges and uncertainty.

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