

*Is there anything so wonderful as a gramophone record? That hard, flat circular piece of inert material that comes to life when you spin it and put the point of the needle in the groove. It comes to life and plays on your emotions, bringing joy or sorrow; you tap your feet or you shed a tear... How do you listen to YOUR records? In my case, I sit alone and spin the discs (usually in the small hours of the morning). I get the feeling that the artists come to me through the loudspeaker of my radiogram. They step out, take a bow and sing or play, and then step back through the speaker and the curtain comes down as the automatic switch clicks the turntable to a standstill. And I am left again with a cold disc.*

GIDEON JAY in Zonk! The African People's Magazine, December 1952\*

The twelve prints in the *Records* set evolved out of an exhibition that took place at Bank Gallery, Durban in January of 2009. It was a solo exhibition of my recent work dealing with imaging South Africa and featured an installation of over 400 internationally released records by Miriam Makeba; documenting her image, career, and the reach of her stance against apartheid. In a room adjacent to this installation, I set up three large-scale prints of records. They had a kinship with the Makeba project, but marked the beginnings of a new body of work. It was a slow expansion of my record collection to include any audio artifact from South Africa—jazz, punk, plays, political speeches, and sports commentary, and as it evolved my focus moved to relatively rare and unusual material including recordings in early formats such as 78 rpm.

My original goal for this ongoing archive was to document each record in the collection, and along with research, eventually make the information available as a searchable database on the web. The twelve large prints on exhibition—*Better, Church, City Special, Columbia, Cape To Cairo Star, Envee, His Master's Voice, Quality, Rave, Sunshine, Tempo* and *Zon-o-phone*—come from this archive. They do not represent it in full but are rather extractions.

Selecting the twelve records that make up the set has been a long and interesting process. What is common to all twelve and what initially drew me to the project was the evidence of their use in the form of scratches and damage. Much of the decision-making was driven by an invented methodology: I selected records that I found most engaging visually, both in terms of original label design and signs of wear. I decided that there could be no repetition of any one label and I thought that the set should encompass a broad range of musical styles and languages.

Physically, these prints are detailed scanned enlargements of individual records. In direct contradiction to what a record collector might prefer to collect, I chose items that were particularly scratched or distressed. The damage on the record was for me a further marking by unknown authors who had unwittingly contributed their history to the object; the image in the print capturing not only the historical audio visually in the form of the lines or grooves, but also the scratches, damage, and repair work done by subsequent owners.

The damage to the records that is evident in the prints reveals an intriguing contradiction. On one hand, in purely visual terms, this damage represents a kind of decay or degradation; perhaps even a type of expressionism. On the other hand, the damage is in most cases the direct result of use and reuse. It could be viewed as the by-product of the most amazing fun—a visual document of the artifact's everyday lived experience. Countless times has the stylus struck the shellac or vinyl until the walls of the grooves gave way—literally these records have been

played to death. This contradiction is heightened when one considers the political, historical context of the object's use.

The beginnings of the print project were serendipitous. I was examining a record, trying to make out the performer and the track titles. The record was so badly damaged that for some time I could not figure this out. As an experiment I decided to scan the record in high resolution to somehow get closer to its surface and perhaps glean some clues. The detail in the scan was incredible and I was able to access hidden information. I then proceeded to print the scan out in small sheets that I taped together to form a grid of the image in large-scale. My motives at this stage were simply aesthetic. The damage seemed visually engaging, recalling expressionistic drawings or prints, while the single central, iconic image reminded me of Jasper Johns' target paintings or Jeremy Wafer's singular forms.

Each record remains a portal into South African musical history and I am drawn to the encoded information that is uncovered in the scans. For example, by scanning the *Tempo* record and enlarging it by 750% I was able to go into the fine details of the label and partially make out the name of the artist—Wilson Silgee and his Forces with "Vula No.1." The name of the label itself had eluded me as well, but I was able to determine that it was indeed *Tempo*, a label of the Gramophone Record Company, a subsidiary of Gallo Records. Silgee, an icon in his own right, was a member of the famous *Jazz Maniacs* in the 1930s and in 1944 became the band's leader. The *Tempo* record probably dates from the mid-1940s.

On *Rave*, the record with the Plaster-of-Paris fill around the hole, the title song is "Kwela Sax" and the musician, Spokes Mashiyane, is credited with having popularized kwela or pennywhistle jive. The name kwela itself, loosely translated as "step up", refers to apartheid-era police vehicles, as when police were making arrests they would order everyone to "step up" into the vehicle. "Kwela Sax," recorded in 1958, is the b-side of "Big Joe Special" and this record marks the first time that Mashiyane played on saxophone. The record became the trendsetting hit of that year and would inspire a whole new style of music. Sax jive—latter called mbaqanga—would dominate South African urban music for the next twenty years.

The *Zon-o-phone* record of "Marching on Pretoria" is the earliest recording in my full collection, probably dating from around 1901-1903. The song originates from the Second Anglo-Boer war and was recorded in London and sung by Ian Colquhoun. Noting the subtle difference in the English version "Marching on Pretoria" as recorded here and the popular Afrikaans version "Marching to Pretoria," I found the grammatical discrepancy curious especially given that the song was sung by both sides during the Boer War.

As I continue to research the records and develop the web archive more histories emerge. But the records still function as audio material. Many are so badly damaged as to be almost unlistenable, but for some, including myself, this has its own unique pleasures. When I sit and listen to them in the small hours of the morning, there are moments when they sound new, almost like something tentatively remixed by Japanese noise artist, Merzbow.

Siemon Allen  
March, 2010

\*Gideon Jay quote sourced from CAROL A. MULLER, "Focus: Music of South Africa", Routledge, 2008  
Other sources include ROB ALLINGHAM, CHRIS BALLANTINE, VEIT ERLMANN and WARREN SIEBRITS  
For a more information about the records go to [www.flatinternational.org](http://www.flatinternational.org)



## RECORDS

a collection project by

siemon allen

[gordonschachatcollection](http://gordonschachatcollection.com)