Does jazz matter? I want to approach this by way of a philosophical detour, and by asking a different but much more important question. Ostensibly unrelated yet in truth fundamental to the argument I shall develop, this question is: can we live together? Hardly any issue today is more urgent and problematic. The question refers, of course, to social cohesion, usually taken to mean the properties that hold societies together as united, harmonious, and functional. In South Africa (my primary focus here, though of course the topic is pressing everywhere), the realization of such a society continues to be out of reach, perhaps more strikingly than at any time since the inaugural democratic elections of 1994. The problem is more extensive than the waves of xenophobic violence that, here as elsewhere, tend to dominate the headlines. A recent survey of social attitudes and political views by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation showed that in 2003 the desire among South Africans for a united society stood at nearly 73 percent, but that by 2013 it had dropped to 55 percent (Wale 2014, 40). That is a decrease of nearly 18 percentage points in a single decade. Even more worryingly, given the country’s past, “race” as a primary identity among South Africans actually increased in popularity (ibid., 16).

Yet it is starkly evident that no social cohesion project will ever succeed if it does not also deal with dire injustices embodied in the material conditions of existence. To the extent that talk of social cohesion ignores these conditions, in the South African case it is likely at best to be regarded as premature, or even (in the words of one commentator) “a slap in the face of the millions of South Africans whose lives are a daily battle just to survive” (Seabe 2012).

At worst, it could even put the project itself at risk. Indeed, for a critic such as Bhekizizwe Peterson, the ideal of social cohesion—spawned by 1994’s historic compromise—is no more than a political imaginary and a strategy of containment. Its purpose, he argues, is to mask the link between unjust social relations and the political economy, which it does by inventing a chimera: namely, “the deification of forgiveness as the sine qua non of nationhood and progress” (Peterson 2012, 5). These are serious criticisms. And yet it is entirely unclear how social justice could be achieved, or even what it would mean, if the search for it took place in isolation from a focus on what has been called our “human foldedness” (Nuttall 2010).
Identity, alterity, and the aesthetic

So the question remains. Can we live together? Many people have pondered this, but none more than the great French sociologist Alain Touraine. What is really involved here becomes clearer when he parses the question into two others: “how can I communicate and live with other people?” And “how can we reconcile our differences with the unity of a collective life?” In other words, how do we create a basis for living together with people who are different from ourselves? Touraine also points the way forward. Yes, we can live together, he says, but on one condition: that we accept that the process of imagining and building new forms of collective and personal life will require that we be willing to lose our identity (2000, 3, 6, 15).

Now, losing—or at least loosening—our identity is a daunting and deeply puzzling prospect. How should we make sense of it? We could start by thinking of it as a readiness to lose, or loosen, those aspects of our social and personal selves that barricade us in, that rupture our common humanity. We could also turn to the philosopher Judith Butler, who uses different words to wrestle with the same idea. In an unforgettable formulation, she argues that we have to allow ourselves to be undone by each other. Nothing short of that will reveal that our fates are inextricably entwined; nothing less will produce a “we.” Finding my ties to “you,” she says, means discovering that

my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know.

But there is an absolute precondition here: the ability really to listen. When we truly listen, we open ourselves to a narration that decnets us, that undermines our supremacy. To listen properly is to hear further than ourselves, “beyond what we are able to hear” (Butler 2004, 18–23).

These thoughts strike me as profoundly important. They also offer an extraordinarily rich philosophical basis for thinking about jazz and its role in society. Music’s essential founding conditions, after all—and here jazz is a paradigm example—are those of sounding and hearing: listening to that which has been sounded. Moreover, the key idea here is that the experience of hearing has the potential to decnet the listener. I am going to argue that this also applies to music, with similar social implications. In principle, the universal context for music is one of reciprocity: a mutual giving and receiving, where the activity of sounding meets the reciprocal activity of hearing, in an exchange that has the capacity to leave both sides undone yet newly produced as a “we.” Remarkably, no words are needed for this to happen. The story is told of a woman friend of Beethoven’s who lost her child; the composer invited her to come round, and when she arrived Beethoven was already sitting at the piano. All he said was, “Let us speak to each other by music.” And for more than an hour he played to her. Her verdict was: “He said much to me, and at last gave me consolation” (DeNora 2013, 2).

If music has abilities of this sort, it has them for a variety of reasons, none of them magical. I have already mentioned one reason: in a genuine process of encountering the Other, an exchange of sounding and listening can cause language to “break up and yield,” undoing or decneting its participants, moving them away from their initial conditions, reorienting them, producing a “we.” But let me briefly mention three other reasons for these abilities of music.

First, music (and jazz is a remarkably vivid instance) is a form of play. It is not by coincidence that we speak of “playing” music—and we know that play is a kind of imaginary world-making, where we can discover or invent new pathways to transfigure our initial templates (ibid., 42–43). Music can play with its given frames: step out of one, try on another, reshape a third, even merge frames; this, as I will show later, is one of the ways music can combat stereotypes, transcend
national and ethnic particularisms, and create images of coexistence or cosmopolitanism. Second, music is lived through the body, not just the mind. Research has shown that this, in part, is why music has the ability to authorize behaviors and attitudes (ibid., 88)—as it does, say, in dancing, working, marching, singing, or quite simply feeling. Third, because musicking takes place in, or constructs, shared times and spaces—those of the real world, as well as of the imagination—it has the ability to “synchronize time” across its various participants (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 116). For those taking part in music, this social synchrony is a “mutual tuning-in relationship”; as such, music making and music-participating are themselves already varieties of “we”-making (Schütz 1951, cited at ibid.).

Now, for several centuries there has been a substantial, ongoing discussion of the role that the emotions must play if any process of social change is to lead to a more just, humane, and cohesive society. Particularly compelling in this discussion and in the evidence adduced in support of it is the crucial function assigned to the aesthetic. The argument is that if we are interested in genuine, deep-rooted change, then the aesthetic dimension will have to play a fundamental role. The aesthetic can’t just be a pleasant add-on, or a “nice-to-have.” The case, in other words, is that our social goals will be imperfectly realized if the aesthetic is absent, or if it is just an optional extra to the processes taking place in the streets, behind the barricades, or in the corridors of power.

A number of thinkers have advanced this thesis, but the one who in recent times has done so most compellingly is the philosopher Martha Nussbaum.2 It is especially striking that her aesthetic argument turns on the idea of love—as a value and a disposition of huge importance in the political domain. With great originality, she harnesses this aesthetic argument to a strategy for social change. Nussbaum’s basic proposition is that “all of the core emotions that sustain a decent society have their roots in, or are forms of, love”: that is, “intense attachments to things outside the control of our will.” Principles alone are not enough. By themselves, they will not do the job of securing a just society, for the straightforward reason that they are “too near the surface of the mind.” The mind must also be engaged at a deeper level—a level below the reach of conscious control, in a domain where emotions reside, where love is anchored: love being the emotion, she says, that “gives respect for humanity its life, making it more than a shell” (2013, 15). Crucially, in the realm of artistic practice, and hence of jazz, this deeper-level engagement of the mind necessarily takes place on the aesthetic plane.

We can now draw several inferences. First, in principle, aesthetic engagement is a highly potent modality of pleasure: of *jouissance*; second, the aesthetic is a privileged gateway to emotions and attachments below the reach of conscious control; third, the aesthetic domain is strongly linked to our capacity to love; and fourth, aesthetic engagement is potentially a form of “we”-making. From these insights, it is only a small step to understanding the hugely important role that music and the other arts can play in society. The conviction that jazz can help facilitate social change rests, then, on an argument about music’s aesthetic reach. Of course, words are free to join with music to achieve this end: they can precede or follow music, or combine with it. But let us be clear. It does not follow that music depends on words. Nor should my comments be taken to imply that music is inherently a force for good. Its capabilities can of course also be harnessed for deeply divisive ends. Let us remember Bourdieu (1984): because of the ways that aesthetic preferences become linked to social class, aesthetic practices—including music—can reinforce social differences, entrench a sense of superiority or inferiority, buttress privilege, and legitimize inequality. But it can get much, much worse than that. And it does.

Around the time of the Second World War, for example, fascists everywhere deployed music as one of the essential armaments in their arsenal. They used it to mobilize support for the party, whip up toxic emotions, create a powerful sense of us-not-them, subordinate the individual to the collective, and choreograph the goose-stepping parades (Macklin 2013, 430–431). In Rwanda in 2005, a Hutu popular musician by the name of Simon Bikindi was indicted by the International
Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda because he had written songs that dehumanized the Tutsi people, stirred up hatred against them, and helped launch the genocide of 1994 (see Baker 2013; Gowan n.d.). In a rather more comical example, until a little more than a decade ago music was used as a weapon in the tense standoff between North and South Korea. Each side placed enormous loudspeakers along the 200-kilometer border, so that each could degrade the other by blasting them with exactly the sort of music they would find horrendous. The North tried to terrorize the South with revolutionary and ideological songs; the South got back at the North by tantalizing them with sensual decadence: they blasted them with American pop (Howard 2010, 70–71). It was a war of aesthetic propaganda designed to fuel hate and keep people apart.

What interests me here, however, is music’s ability to make a difference for the good, and how this has played out in a great variety of social circumstances, cultural contexts, and historical eras. In postwar situations such as Rwanda, Bosnia, and parts of the Middle East and Africa, music has enabled its audiences and participants to reach out symbolically. Through music, opponents have sometimes found one another, discovered points of contact, forged a reality to accommodate difference, repaired relationships, and worked towards reconciliation (see for instance Castelo-Branco 2010, 243–252; Slachmijlder 2005). Kenya offers a particularly compelling example. There, the music of popular singer-songwriter Eric Wainaina played an important role. By merging antagonistic Kenyan and Indian popular musical styles and singing in a variety of local languages, Wainaina’s songs enacted the cultural and ethnic integration he and others desired.

The Second World War offers a very different example—from another world and another era. In June 1941, the United States entered into a wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. But how was this sudden and unprecedented cooperation with Stalin going to be justified? How to secure a buy-in from the American public? How to change popular American perceptions of the dreaded Bolsheviks, at least until the end of the war? The answer, or at least part of the answer, came from music, which was tasked with playing a key role. Russian classical music was suddenly given special public prominence; but the piece that, more than any other, reshaped attitudes in the US was, remarkably, Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony. Composed during the siege of Leningrad, nicknamed after that city, and repeatedly performed, broadcast, and discussed in the US in 1942 and 1943, it was this evocative 80-minute work, in particular, that won over large number of Americans to the alliance with Stalin and gave them a sense of the Soviet Union that was quite different from the stereotypical attitudes of suspicion and fear (MacCurtain 2013).

Let me now redirect this narrative to South Africa. How is it relevant here?

The “What”: The Case of Jazz in South Africa

What I find especially striking is that, for a country with as long and as traumatic a history of separateness, alienation, and repression—or perhaps because of this—South Africa has a rich history of what I call transgressive music: the sort that disputes fixed boundaries, transcends alterities, negotiates difference, seeks cohesion, forges unity. I want to illustrate this through brief discussions of a variety of local idioms and genres.

Arguably, jazz has led the way. But fundamental to the growth of local jazz, and present from the start, is marabi—a city music that took root in South Africa’s urban slums (principally those of Johannesburg), during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Now it is important to understand that marabi was, at its core, transgressive, and integrative: it was a pan-ethnic dance idiom that drew its melodic inspiration eclectically from a wide variety of “traditional,” African–Christian, and Western–popular sources. Marabi was forged by unschooled slumyard musicians. Perhaps their most singular achievement was that this new idiom provided a unifying cultural form for the variety of people in the slumyards: people of very different cultural backgrounds who had migrated to the country’s industrial heartland to find work. By the late
1920s, marabi had begun to extend the scope of its integrations: it explored ways of fusing with the mainstream jazz that was being imported from the US. This gave birth in South Africa to what I call marabi-jazz, a unique jazz genre whose magnificent early flourishing can still be heard in the big-band “swing” recordings that have survived from the 1930s and 1940s (Ballantine 2012). Much of the country’s greatest jazz has been built on this transgressive platform and has followed the example of its bold integrations.

Not surprisingly, the end of apartheid and the arrival of a democratic order created new imperatives and asked new questions, at least some of them aesthetic. For the progressive jazz and other music of the time, the fundamental question was this: in the new democracy, how might music shape identities so as to help construct new sorts of human foldedness?

An extremely impressive answer to that question came from the work of a jazz band put together in the years following the formal ending of apartheid; their CD, Mahube, named after the band, was released in 1998. A twelve-piece outfit made up of top musicians from across southern Africa, Mahube (a Sotho word meaning “new dawn”) explicitly set out to create music that would be the very image of a democratic, egalitarian, non-racial future, in which all could meaningfully live together. Apartheid had split South Africa from the rest of the continent; healing that split was always going to be difficult—as sporadic outbreaks of terrible xenophobic violence have since confirmed.

The music of Mahube was historical as much as geographical: associated with memory, as much as with place and culture. Its complex sonic weave was transgressive and cosmopolitanist; it sought to destabilize identities that had become too fixed and bounded. By offering new forms of identification, the music involved listeners in new forms of transgression and integration. The musical entanglements were many, subtle, and overlapping. They included various traditional idioms; the harmonic progressions of marabi; the close-voiced wind arrangements of South African township jazz of the 1940s and 1950s; the bright instrumental sounds, vocal harmonizations, and bouncy rhythms of later township genres (such as mbaqanga); and the maskanda guitar style of migrant workers. The band no longer exists, but its solitary CD vividly demonstrates that such idioms collided, happily and unexpectedly, not only with each other, but also with ones from further north: the music also incorporated, say, Shona mbira patterns from Zimbabwe, or even the vocal melodies and harmonies of Congolese popular music of the 1950s. The music was an ecstatic invocation of a new, southern African “we.” Consider, for example, the track named “U Shonaphi Na?” In this piece alone, one hears traces of seven distinct and entirely different styles and idioms, seamlessly fused together, and blended into a song of great beauty and complexity. In addition to maskanda, marabi, and township jazz—mentioned above—we also hear isicathamiya (a migrant-worker choral idiom made globally famous by Ladysmith Black Mambazo), protest song, the hosho rattle from Zimbabwe, and an entirely alien 7/8 meter. So the piece subverts the old South African “normal” and seductively evokes the cosmopolitanism of some hybrid future time.

A listener encountering Mahube in the early years of democracy and reflecting on the long tradition of marabi-jazz would surely have believed that jazz in the new dispensation would need little encouragement to follow such compelling examples, and even to become the musical signature of the post-apartheid order. In the main, however, this is not what happened. Instead of taking the lead, jazz in the early years of South Africa’s new democracy often fell victim to more venal temptations. The fledgling order brought freedoms, changes in the configuration of social values and, at least for some, a sudden explosion of opportunities to make money. For jazz, the implications of this state of affairs quickly became apparent, in at least three closely related ways: jazz frequently became corporatized, commercialized, and conformist. The struggle against apartheid was over; so, too, the new order seemed to proclaim, was struggle in general. Jazz had had a long and honorable association with the quest for social justice, but now the job was “done.” The music’s pedigree was impeccable; its deeply entrenched symbolic association with the defeat of
apartheid yielded significant cultural capital, which now conferred a high degree of social, political, and economic respectability. For those so inclined, jazz musicians could take up residence in the Promised Land and enjoy themselves. But if these were blessings, they were very mixed indeed (Ballantine 2012, 194–198).

It need not have been this way, of course. In addition to the obvious invitation to continue to build on the long, diverse, extraordinarily rich, and musically integrating history of township jazz, there were also the recent and continuing practices of towering jazz figures. One of these was Abdullah Ibrahim, South Africa’s best-known jazz musician for some fifty years. He had been—and continues to be—a vessel in which diverse, even contradictory musical cultures and idioms run together. In addition to marabi, these have included traces of Xhosa and other endogenous styles, missionary hymnody, Western classical sources, the ghoema rhythms of the Cape Malays, the melodic inflections of his adopted Islam, a jazz pianism informed by Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk, and much else. The significance of these profound, original syntheses remains clear. They foster new ways of identifying, collaborating, joining; they connote new forms of identity, personhood, and community. As such, they are musical metaphors of cohesion: of living together.

**The “How”: The Example of Chris McGregor**

Musically, my examples have indicated a variety of musical outcomes: they have pointed to the sorts of aesthetic consequences we might expect to find at the end of process of being “undone”—that is, after we have permitted our identities to be loosened through radical creative encounters with musical others. If, then, these examples are endings, or places of tentative arrival, what might beginnings look like? Can we think of examples of the kinds of paths that might get us there? This inquiry replaces, or at least supplements, the “what” with the “how.” I focus now on the example with which I am most familiar, and that in the South African jazz context seems to me to offer the clearest, most striking answer. I refer to the life lived and the music made and played by the late Chris McGregor.

A figure at least as impressive as Ibrahim, McGregor was one of South Africa’s greatest and most influential jazz pianists, composers, and bandleaders. The end of a human life is always meaningful, but the death of Chris McGregor on May 26, 1990 at the age of 53 is tragically ironic in ways that may not be immediately apparent. His life was just long enough—by a little more than three months—for him to see the release of Nelson Mandela from prison, but it ended too soon—by just four years—for him to rejoice in the inauguration of the (formal) South African democracy for which he had always longed and, through his artistic practice, had always striven. His life and career were profoundly shaped by the multicultural human and musical values he learned at the feet of extraordinary mentors in his boyhood and youth, and by the choices he made to place himself off limits, beyond the boundaries that apartheid society deemed to be normal, conventional, and safe. When political circumstances forced him into exile, he became better-known and appreciated abroad than at home, and his death occurred at exactly the moment that it would have been possible for him to return, either as a resident or as a regular visitor. In part because he had lived in political exile in Europe since 1964, he was, and still is, little known in South Africa—certainly much less so than Ibrahim. And yet, for reasons deeply relevant to the argument of this chapter, the example of his work and life seems to me of seminal importance to the future of South African jazz and its potential social role.

In a nutshell, what shaped the life and career of Chris McGregor were his profoundly formative adventures of being undone by music other than his own, and the ways that his uncommonly intense musical and social encounters with others deemed different from himself helped loosen his identity. That is, he was shaped by the multicultural human and musical values he learned at
the feet of extraordinary mentors in his boyhood and youth, and by the choices he made to place himself off limits, beyond the boundaries that apartheid society deemed to be acceptable, legitimate, and safe.

Important to our purposes, then, is to think about McGregor’s work as a socially relevant aesthetic exemplar. In doing so, I draw upon an extended interview I was privileged to have with him in London in 1986. Chris McGregor grew up in the eastern Cape district of South Africa (where his father was a teacher at a mission school); the earliest, and certainly the most formative, musical experiences of life occurred there, and were those of the African music that surrounded him. These musical experiences would have included traditional Xhosa songs of work and ceremony: as a small boy he would go and listen, dance, clap, and sing.

As a white kid with open ears, you just had to listen on the wind to hear it. I would observe and listen—for example to the kind of things that two Xhosa women would sing, with interwoven parts. For sure, those were my first counterpoints. I was very much into it, actually. I was one who would dance and clap and sing whenever possible [laughs]! Not that this was without its difficulties, especially regarding identity: I had genuine problems identifying myself. It caused me quite a lot of anguish later on.

Later, at boarding school, he would use weekend leave to rush down to the “blacker” end of town in order to listen to the music coming out of the black record shops—mbaqanga (the urban-black township jazz of the time), but also Ellington, the Mills Brothers, the Inkspots, the King Cole Trio. Free Saturday mornings were especially valuable: “I used also to walk around with my guitar and sit down with a black accordion player on the street—playing the street music of the Africans living in the towns.” That was possible because “this music was all over the streets, and it was fun, and I’d kind of stumbled on it.” And he loved it. But hearing Ellington, on record and on the radio, fell into the category he labeled “wake-up experiences.” Thinking about why Ellington’s music “really got to me,” he surmised that this was “perhaps because it offered a certain solution to the problem of ‘black’ traditions in a ‘white’ world. Indeed, ‘Mood Indigo’ struck me as a complete mastery of all worlds.” He also befriended a black pianist who introduced him to Fats Waller. Soon he had his own small jazz band at school. Unsurprisingly, “fellow pupils, teachers and whatnot considered me a fairly weird case, you know.”

Simultaneously, and often in tension with this even during his high school years, were his serious piano studies in Western classical music: working hard on Bach, Beethoven, and Chopin, laying the foundation, as many believed, for a future as a performer. The tension was not just a matter of public expectations. “I can remember quite clearly feeling a certain malaise with [the classical repertory], and feeling that it excluded too much of my real day-to-day experience of Africa.” The malaise afflicted him still more strongly during what promised to be a brilliant musical career as a music student at the University of Cape Town. The course was Western, classical, and conventional—and it was steadily superseded by McGregor’s deepening personal involvement with the black jazz scene in and around the city. He met some of the outstanding figures of South African jazz when the musical King Kong came to town in April 1959: Kippie Moeketsi, Jonas Gwangwa, Sol Klaaste, and others. Around the same time, he had two other powerful, confirming experiences. One of these was the discovery, together with his black jazz associates in Cape Town, of Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk (“our jam sessions became more intensely bebop,” and he regularly attended the already avant-garde Abdullah Ibrahim’s “famous hangout, the Ambassador School of Dancing” in Woodstock, Cape Town); the other was an immersion in township jazz, mainly through sitting in (as the only white) with a fifteen-piece black band for Saturday night dances at a hall in the impoverished township known as Langa. By his third year he “was treating the whole university with a fair amount of abstraction,” and by his fourth year “things were becoming
completely impossible.” Increasingly, he was now involved in “a tight routine of very intense jazz activity.” Quite plainly, though, for a white boy in the deepening gloom of apartheid South Africa, this was jazz activity of the “wrong” sort.

Very different musical ingredients had by this time played a role in McGregor’s development. Some people saw these ingredients as incommensurable, but his later work proved how wrong they were. Remarkably, these syntheses were already happening at this early stage, when he was just starting out as a young professional.

We were fairly consciously beboppers, playing Charlie Parker, but also mbaqanga stuff at dance sessions in Langa. This meant finding a pattern, finding agreement with the guitar especially, and with the bass, but doing quite a lot of “punching in”—which relates to the sort of comping that you do in bebop. In fact I learnt a lot about bebop comping by doing this, learning to create something that falls at a certain place in the bar, or in a four-bar sequence, and then repeating it. This was very good training, because it showed that meanings could change according to context. It might just be an accent in a line; but if other players hear it as implying a circular rhythm, then there is a certain compulsion to repeat that accent. For example, if the accent has the effect of transforming the third bar in a mbaqanga sequence into a first bar, that accent could excite somebody, say the lead trumpeter, to make a phrase that actually begins there.

These were also my first experiences of building things from riffs. You’d get the mbaqanga chords going, the lead trumpeter or sax player would improvise a melody, and then, in the next eight-bar sequence, out it would come, voiced and all. That was magic to me! Out of this would emerge the most amazing complexity of texture, instrumental color, melodic interactions, the rhythmic interactions of three or four riffs going together, and a soloist in front, improvising. I didn’t see a contradiction between these two (bebop and “township”), so much as a complementary relationship of linear and circular procedures.

How, one might ask, was this musically possible? How could a logical contradiction between linear and circular procedures—between bebop and “township,” between the metropolitan North and its apartheid Other—be rethought as complementary? McGregor’s explanation is revelatory. Without using these terms, he pointed to the bidirectional listening, the loosening of identity, and the mutual undoing that provided the ground for this new synthesis, making the impossible possible.

It seemed to me that the same skills were being demanded. With mbaqanga music, because you’ve simplified the thing and made it circular, you are always confronted with the result: a circuit works itself out, and then you invent very much on formal implications. In contrast, in quite a lot of American jazz you say something and then leave it and do something else. It’s like telling a story, but the story doesn’t always have to hang together all that well; there are conventions, but you can even just stop what you’re doing and zoom off in a different key. It’s done with depth, but quite often it’s just done with flash.

As a musician, you quickly understand there are other things going on in mbaqanga. Bebop makes a bridge between itself and its classical background; you’re dealing with fairly sophisticated harmonic languages. Mbaqanga offers a nice counterbalance: a rhythmically oriented music in which you look for other aspects, such as rhythmic and melodic depth. I don’t like to say “polyrhythmic” as people always get the wrong idea. I mean, there’s a lot going on there. There’s even a certain impulse to create, a compulsion to create just to keep it interesting.
The very best players compress enormous inventiveness into that four-bar *mbaqanga* thing. It can also be an eight-bar sequence in which the melody sits only over the third beat of the first bar to the first beat of the second bar. That same bit of melody might happen in a 16-bar sequence, you see. You’d get people working all the options with fascinating results. There were people, like those in the band led by “Cups and Saucers,” working with a really great sensitivity to this kind of structuring, and very cleverly, too. Sensitive, clever and absolutely spot-on, you know, like never goofing at all. I can remember at times being on tenterhooks—like wondering, which way will things go? And if I put that in there, can I find it again? Ja, wow, I can! Damn, yes, and what a great feeling it is! That aspect of the melodic thing goes on today, you know. I mean I hear it today, people still working the implications of all that.

So in addition you learn a certain responsibility, but also a certain responsiveness. You realize that one thing isn’t just one thing, and that—yes—you can play with different allusions. And you learn about the rhythmical impulse in bebop, where some things just go by—so if you are too intent on linearity, or on building up something, then, in the example I’ve just given, you would be unable to relate a new outcome to its origin. You would be unable to recognize the outcome as a musical situation where you are confronted with both linearity and circularity: where a certain cross-rhythm has been set up with one meaning, but has also come to mean something else, such that where it began is happening at the same time as what it came to. I think an awareness of this certainly does help explain the distinctive flavor in South African jazz . . . yes, I think so.

At stake here, manifestly, was the making of an original repertoire, founded in turn upon the forging of an original style. How, I asked McGregor, would he describe that style?

Wow, how would I describe it? It was our version of hard bop, if you like. It was an African hard bop—there you go!—coming in part from our *mbaqanga* and big-band experience, but influenced by and tending towards the outputs of Americans we felt close to: John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy. So you could say that our direction was towards the freer end of hard bop.

Crucial, of course, to its character as “the freer end” was that Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes “felt close” not just to the likes of Coltrane, Coleman, and Dolphy, but also the likes of Abdullah Ibrahim (still known then as Dollar Brand), Hugh Masekela, and Kippie Moeketsi (then members of the Jazz Epistles), with their roots, like those of the Blue Notes themselves, in *marabi* and *mbaqanga*. Yet the musician who at this stage appears to have had the greatest impact on the continuing “undoing” and remaking of Chris McGregor was the extraordinary Tete Mbambisa, whom he met in Langa in 1960 or 1961. Better known today as a pianist, Mbambisa was then the leader of the Four Yanks:

They were a wonderful vocal group, who impressed me no end. . . . They were really an eye opener to me. They were very sophisticated, in the sense that they were using harmonies and voice leadings that you would think were completely impossible. They were very masterful, really . . . with a harmonic language as high as a skyscraper. Really insane stuff, insane stuff! I’ve never heard anything quite like it since, you know. In fact I don’t think there’s been anything quite like it . . . . They had a whole repertoire—vocal *mbaqanga*, American stuff, popular standards—but all very interestingly worked out with regard to voice placing, vocal texture, very sophisticated voice leading, and harmonization. They had voicings that led to clusters involving semitones and whatnot, and, oh
God, you’d hear the top voice and the middle voice like a minor ninth apart, and they’d be leading things chromatically all round the place! Extremely sophisticated. Very difficult stuff to hold up, really.

In everything the Four Yanks did, the same mentality was at work, and it was very, very intense and very, very together and very, very polished, with a lot of “dimension.” So impressive! My goodness me, it bowled me over immediately! Like wow, such a lovely sound! And the voicings! And the working out of it! . . . But boy, what elaboration! I mean, really incredibly elaborate stuff.

And I learnt a lot when I was sitting at the keyboard for the Four Yanks. I was working out all kinds of things—different ways of coloring, and whatnot—and besides, the Four Yanks worked entirely by ear, with nothing written out: it was all ear and memory. That’s big work—very big work!

At this point in our conversation, it started to become clear to me that the “loosening” of McGregor’s identity had led to his becoming open to more than just new ways of thinking about, and making, jazz. It had also enabled a radically altered approach to some of the sociality embodied within jazz, and to an appreciation of how that sociality might—perhaps should—be valued. What led me to this insight was his response to my astonishment that the majority of the musicians producing these complex and original musical outputs were largely or wholly untutored. Sharpening this into question, I asked if it ever seemed to him that a lack of formal training had left these musicians with deficits? He answered as follows:

Actually, there’s another way of looking at that—and it’s another fascinating aspect of the whole thing. It relates directly to a whole tradition of African–village life, which is that people contribute what they can. . . . Now, in this kind of big-band mbaqanga tradition that we’re talking about, people are getting an education at the same time, you know. You can’t really think in terms of limited technical expertise. A guy might know three notes on the sax, and see a way of inserting them in this thing; he might see a way of involving two others, perhaps because he’s a little ahead of them and can find a way of including them. It’s an aspect of African music that people really should study, I think. So if your beginner in the sax section is musically attuned, that’s the way he’ll start getting in there. And it’s a very valuable thing. It’s as good as most colleges. It’s even better, because you learn a whole thing, you learn a whole communal experience, and a whole attitude besides just the notes you play. I would hate to see that get lost. . . . What’s interesting is that you can get a guy who started there, and who comes out making the conservatory student look ridiculous. You don’t have to hunt for examples of that, they abound [laughs]!

**Conclusion**

On the South African jazz scene, Chris McGregor is a model of how the musical and existential dynamics suggested in the philosophical section of this chapter might be approached and achieved. His social, psychological, and musical upbringing invited him to experiment creatively with various sorts of social and aesthetic boundary breaking. Enticed, perhaps provoked, to listen with openness to the music that his historical circumstances had labeled “other,” he courageously allowed himself to be “undone” by what he heard and the contexts in which he heard it. This path led him into powerful and aesthetically meaningful encounters with a wide variety of musical idioms and styles. In addition to passing through Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Western hymn singing, it took him to indigenous African part-singing, marabi, township jazz, Ellington, Parker,
Kippie Moeketsi, Tete Mbambisa, Coltrane, Coleman, apparently incommensurable linear and circular musical procedures, and so on. The process challenged him to reconcile different, even ostensibly contradictory ways of understanding music, the world, and one’s place in it. Among the many significant consequences of this journey was a deepened—indeed transcultural—approach to the sociality of jazz, and a socially integrative appreciation of how the music might be learned.

It is of course much easier to pursue social cohesion on the plain of aesthetic practice than in the hard, material reality of everyday life. But if we take seriously my arguments about the need for emotional and aesthetic engagement in any successful social change, then the sorts of jazz-making, musical communities, and sustaining practices I have referred to are heuristic. They are musical experiences of rapprochement, coexistence, boundary transgression, synchronized modalities, and merged frames: in short, of imaginary world-making. In varying degrees, they are sites where musical language breaks up and yields, where identity is undone, where a new “we” is tentatively produced. As such they are also pointers to some of the ways these issues might be thought in the quotidian South African context (though manifestly not that context alone); and they challenge composers, performers, teachers, programmers, and others across the range of jazz genres and practices. We are, after all, trying to build—perhaps to discover—a humane future for our society, and our world. And one of the essential characteristics of this future, if it is to be worth having at all, is that cohesion will have been achieved and sociality realized in a way that enables all of us to live together, and everyone to belong and to flourish.

Notes
1. In its earliest and decidedly different iteration, a version of this chapter was given as the keynote address to the Ninth Annual Congress of the South African Society for Research in Music (SASRIM), held in Cape Town from July 16–18, 2015. Published here is a version now substantially revised and extended; it also adapts and quotes freely from Ballantine (2013, 2016).
3. “Cups and Saucers” is the nickname by which jazz saxophonist Ephraim Nkanuka was commonly known.
4. Founded as a recording group by visiting US pianist John Mehegan in 1959, the name Jazz Epistles was adopted when Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) replaced Mehegan. Other members of this critically acclaimed group were Hugh Masekela, Kippie Moeketsi, and Jonas Gwanga.

References
Gowan, Jennifer. n.d. Fanning the flame: A musician’s role in the Rwandan genocide. www.academia.edu/3988185/Fanning_the_Flame_A_Musicians_Role_in_the_Rwandan_Genocide.

**Discography**