Internationally renowned SAfrican author Rian Malan has researched & written a remarkable expose for Rolling Stone magazine in the USA, on the murky side of music's international mainstream. It's about SAfrican singer-songwriter Solomon Linda - The man who recorded & composed Mbube (aka - The Lion Sleeps Tonight / Whimaway / In the Jungle, etc).

Part 1 of a 3 part series that follows the fate of a great song-writer who 'sold' his soul & song to Gallo Africa for a few Guinness - when technically & morally he should have earned approx. $10 Million dollars (US)!!! Some say $15 Million for a song that could have been to SAfrica what 'Waltzing Matilda' is to Australia - Goodness forbid!! But you know what we mean... the fact is that's how the American’s & Europeans would listen to it if they knew where it belonged. Many American & British composers have claimed the copyright to MBUBE over the past 50 odd hidden years. It's about time that we get to know a little of our own history & dig our own roots. This all relates to the SA music in crisis article by Angus Kerr and his contention that East Coast Radio and the other Top Forty American Formatted Radio Stations in Africa need to show a little more interest in where, and how, they live!

In The Jungle

--- it is one of the great musical mysteries of all time: How American music legends made millions off the work of a Zulu tribesman who died a pauper. After six decades, the truth is finally told.
Once upon a time, a long time ago, a small miracle took place in the brain of a man named Solomon Linda. It was 1939, and he was standing in front of a microphone in the only recording studio in black Africa when it happened. He hadn't composed the melody or written it down or anything. He just opened his mouth and out it came, a haunting skein of fifteen notes that flowed down the wires and into a trembling stylus that cut tiny grooves into a spinning block of bees wax, which was taken to England and turned into a record that became a very big hit in that part of Africa.

Later, the song took flight and landed in America, where it mutated into a truly immortal pop epiphany that soared to the top of the charts here and then everywhere, again and again, returning every decade or so under different names and guises. Navajo Indians sing it at powwows. Japanese teenagers know it as TK. Phish perform it live. Cybersurfers recognize it as the theme song of a hugely popular British website. It has been recorded by artists as diverse as R.E.M. and Glen Campbell, Brian Eno and Chet Atkins, the Nylons and schlockmeister Bert Kaempfert. The New Zealand army band turned it into a march. England's 1986 World Cup soccer squad turned it into a joke. Hollywood put it in Ace Ventura Pet Detective. It has logged nearly three centuries of continuous radio air play in the U.S. alone. It is the most famous melody ever to emerge from Africa, a tune that has penetrated so deep into the human consciousness over so many generations that one can truly say, here is a song the whole world knows.

Its epic transcultural saga is also, in a way, the story of popular music, which limped pale-skinned and anaemic into the twentieth century but danced out the other side vastly invigorated by transfusions of ragtime and rap, jazz, blues and soul, all of whose blood lines run back to Africa via slave ships and plantations and ghettos. It was in the nature of this transaction that black men gave more than they got and often ended up with nothing.

This one's for Solomon Linda, then, a Zulu who wrote a melody that earned untold millions for white men but died so poor that his widow couldn't afford a stone for his grave. Let's take it from the top, as they say in the trade.

Part I: A story about music

This is an African yarn, but it begins with an unlikely friendship between an aristocratic British imperialist and a world-famous American Negro. Sir Henry Loch is a rising star of the Colonial Office. Orpheus McAdoo is leader of the celebrated Virginia Jubilee Singers, a combo that specializes in syncopated spirituals. They meet during McAdoo's triumphant tour of Australia in the 1880s, and when Sir Henry becomes High Commissioner of the Cape Colonys a few years later, it occurs to him that Orpheus might find it interesting to visit. Next thing, McAdoo and his troupe are on the road in Africa, playing to slack-jawed crowds in dusty mining towns.

This American music is a revelation to "civilized natives", hitherto forced to wear starched collars and sing horrible dirges under the direction of dour white missionaries. Mr. McAdoo is a stern old Bible thumper, to be sure, but there's a subversively rhythmic intensity in his music, a primordial stirring of funk and soul. The African brothers have never heard such a thing. The tour [TWO SEPARATE TOURS - totalling eight years, but the first] turns into a five-year epic. Wherever Orpheus goes, "jubilee" music outfits spring up in his wake and spread the glad tidings, which eventually penetrate even the loneliest outposts of civilization.

One such place is Gordon Memorial School, perched on the rim of a wild valley called Msinga, which lies in the Zulu heartland, about 300 miles southeast of Johannesburg. Among the half-naked herd boys who drift through the mission is a rangy kid called Solomon Linda, born 1909, who gets into the Orpheus-inspired syncopation thing and works bits of it into the Zulu songs he and his friends sing at weddings and feasts.
In the mid-Thirties they shake off the dust and cow shit and take the train to Johannesburg, city of gold, where they move into the slums and become kitchen boys and factory hands. Life is initially very perplexing. Solly keeps his eyes open and transmutes what he sees into songs that he and his home boys perform a capella on weekends. He has songs about work, songs about crime, songs about how banks rob you by giving you paper in exchange for real money, songs about how rudely the whites treat you when you go to get your pass stamped. People like the music. Solly and his friends develop a following. Within two years they turn themselves into a very cool urban act that wears pinstriped suits, bowler hats and dandy two-tone shoes. They become Solomon Linda and the Evening Birds, inventors of a music that will later become known as isicathamiya, arising from the warning cry, "Cothoza, bafana" - tread carefully, boys.

These were Zulus, you see, and their traditional dancing was punctuated by mighty foot stomplings that, when done in unison, quite literally made the earth tremble. This was fine in the bush, but if you stomped the same way in town, you smashed wooden floors, cracked cement and sometimes broke your feet, so the whole dance had to be restrained and moderated. Cognoscenti will recall Ladysmith Black Mambazo's feline and curiously fastidious movements onstage. That's treading carefully.

In any event, there were legions of careful treaders in South Africa's cities, usually Zulu migrants whose Saturday nights were devoted to epic beer-fueled bacchanalias known as "tea meetings". These were part fashion show and part heroic contest between rival a capella gladiators, often with a stray white man pulled off the street to act as judge and a cow or goat as first prize. The local black bourgeoisie was mortified by these antics. Careful treaders were an embarrassment, widely decried for their "primitive" bawling and backward lyrics, which dwelled on such things as witchcraft, crime and using love potions to get girls. The groups had names like the Naughty Boys or the Boiling Waters, and when World War II broke out, some started calling themselves 'mbombers, after the dive-bombing Stukas they'd seen on newsreels. 'Mbombers were by far the coolest and most dangerous black thing of their time.

Yes! Dangerous! Skeptics are referred to "Ngazula Emagumeni" (on Rounder CD 5025), an early Evening Birds track whose brain-rattling intensity thoroughly guts anyone who thinks of a capella as smooth tunes for mellow people. The wild, rocking sound came from doubling the bass voices and pumping up their volume, an innovation that was largely Linda's, along with the high style and the new dance moves. He was the Elvis Presley of his time and place, a shy, gangly thirty-year-old, so tall that he had to stoop as he passed through doorways. It's odd to imagine him singing soprano, but that was usually his gig in the group: He was the leader, the "controller", singing what Zulus called fasi pathi, a blood-curdling falsetto that a white man might render as first part.

The Evening Birds were spotted by a talent scout in 1938 and taken to the top of an office building in downtown Jo'burg. There they saw the first recording studio in sub-Saharan Africa, shipped out from England by Eric Gallo, a jovial Italian who started in the music business by selling American hillbilly records to working-class Boers. Before long he bought his own recording machine and started churning out those Dust Bowl ditties in local languages, first Afrikaans, then Zulu, Xhosa and what have you. His ally in this experiment was Griffiths Motsieloa, the country's first black producer, a refined classicist who abhorred this cultural slumming. But what could he do? The boss was determined to sell records to blacks. When Afro-hillbilly failed to catch on, they decided to lay down some isicathamiya and take a leap into the unknown.

Solomon Linda and the Evening Birds cut several songs under Motsieloa's direction, but the one we're interested in was called "Mbube", Zulu for "the lion", recorded at
their second session, in 1939. It was a simple three-chord ditty with lyrics something along the lines of, "Lion! Ha! You're a lion!" inspired by an incident in the Birds' collective Zulu boyhood when they chased lions that were stalking their father's cattle. The first take was a dud, as was the second. Exasperated, Motsieloa looked into the corridor, dragooned a pianist, guitarist and banjo player, and tried again.

The third take almost collapsed at the outset as the unrehearsed musicians dithered and fished for the key, but once they started cooking, the song was glory bound. "Mbube" wasn't the most remarkable tune, but there was something terribly compelling about the underlying chant, a dense meshing of low male voices above which Solomon yodelled and howled for two exhilarating minutes, occasionally making it up as he went along. The third take was the great one, but it achieved immortality only in its dying seconds, when Solly took a deep breath, opened his mouth and improvised the melody that the world now associates with these words:

In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight.

Griffiths Motsieloa must have realized he'd captured something special, because that chunk of bees wax was shipped all the way to England and shipped back in the form of ten-inch 78-rpm records, which went on sale just as Hitler invaded Poland. Marketing was tricky, because there was hardly any black radio in 1939, but the song went out on "the re-diffusion", a land line that pumped music, news and "native affairs" propaganda into black neighbourhoods, and people began trickling into stores to ask for it. The trickle grew into a steady stream that just rolled on for years and years, necessitating so many re-pressings that the master disintegrated. By 1948, "Mbube" had sold in the region of 100,000 copies, and Solomon Linda was the undefeated and undefeatable champion of hostel singing competitions and a superstar in the world of Zulu migrants.

Pete Seeger, on the other hand, was in a rather bad way. He was a banjo player living in a cold-water flat on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village with a wife, two young children and no money. Scion of wealthy New York radicals, he'd dropped out of Harvard ten years earlier and hit the road with his banjo on his back, learning hard-times songs for people in the Hoovervilles, lumber camps and coal mines of Depression America. In New York he joined a band with Woody Guthrie. They wore work shirts and jeans, and wrote folk songs that championed the common man in his struggle against capitalist bloodsuckers. Woody had a slogan on his guitar that said, "This machine kills fascists". Pete's banjo had a kinder, gentler variation: "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender". He was a proto-hippie, save that he didn't smoke reefer or even drink beer.

He was also a pacifist, at least until Hitler invaded Russia. Scenting a capitalist plot to destroy the brave Soviet socialist experiment, Pete and Woody turned gung-ho overnight and started writing anti-Nazi war songs, an episode that made them briefly famous. After that it was into uniform and off to the front, where Pete played the banjo for bored GIs. Discharged in '45, he returned to New York and got a gig of sorts in the public school system, teaching toddlers to warble the half-forgotten folk songs of their American heritage. It wasn't particularly glorious, the money was rotten, and on top of that, he was sick in bed with a bad cold.

Came a knock on the door, and, lo, there stood his friend Alan Lomax, later to be hailed as the father of world music. Alan and his dad, John, were already famous for their song-collecting forays into the parallel universe of rural black America, where they'd discovered giants like Muddy Waters and Leadbelly. Alan was presently working for Decca, where he'd just rescued a package of 78s sent from Africa by a record company in the vain hope that someone might want to release them in America. They were about to be thrown away when Lomax intervened, thinking, "God, Pete's the man for these". And here they were: ten shellac 78s, one of which said "Mbube" on its label. Pete put it on his old Victrola and sat back. He was fascinated - there was something catchy...
about the underlying chant, and that wild, skirling falsetto was amazing.

"Golly", he said, "I can sing that". So he got out pen and paper and started transcribing the song, but he couldn't catch the words through all the hissing on the disk. The Zulus were chanting, "Uyimbube, uyimbube", but it to Pete it sounded like, awimboowee or maybe awimoweh, so that's how he wrote it down. Later he taught "Wimoweh" to the rest of his band, the Weavers, and it became, he says, "just about my favourite song to sing for the next forty years".

This was no great achievement, given that the Weavers' repertoire was full of dreck like "On Top of Old Smoky" and "Greensleeves". Pete will admit no such thing, but one senses he was growing tired of cold-water flats and wanted a proper career, asbefitting a thirty something father of two. He toned down his politics, excised references to dark sexual lusts from Leadbelly standards, and threw some hokey cowboy songs into the mix. He even allowed his wife to outfit the band in matching corduroy jackets, a hitherto-unimaginable concession to showbiz, when they landed a gig at the Village Vanguard.

The pay was $200 a week plus free hamburgers, and the booking was for two weeks only, but something unexpected happened: Crowds started coming. The gig was extended for a month, and then another. The Weavers' appeal was inexplicable to folk purists, who noted that most of their songs had been around forever, in obscure versions by blacks and red necks who never had hits anywhere. What they failed to grasp was that Seeger and his comrades had managed to filter the stench of poverty and pig shit out of the proletarian music and make it wholesome and fun for Eisenhower-era squares. Six months passed, and the Weavers were still at the Vanguard, drawing sellout crowds, including the odd refugee from the swell supper clubs of Times Square.

One such figure was Gordon Jenkins, a sallow jazz cat with a gigolo's mustache and a matinee idol's greased-back hairstyle. Jenkins started out arranging for Benny Goodman before scoring a huge hit in his own right with, I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" an appalling piece of crap. These days he was working with Frank Sinatra, and holding down a day job as musical director at Decca Records. Jenkins loved the Weavers, returning night after night, sometimes sitting through two consecutive shows. He wanted to sign them up, but his bosses were dubious. It was only when Jenkins offered to pay for the recording sessions himself that Decca capitulated and gave the folkies a deal.

Their first recording came out in June 1950. It was "Good night Irene", an old love song they'd learned off their friend Leadbelly, and it was an immediate click, in the parlance of the day. The flip side was an Israeli hora called "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena", and it clicked, too. So did "Roving Kind", a nineteenth-century folk ditty they released that November, and even "On Top of Old Smoky", which hit Number Two the following spring. The Weavers leapt from amateur hootenannies to the stages of America's poshest night spots and casinos. They wore suits and ties, Brylcreemed their hair, appeared on TV and pulled down two grand a week. Chagrined and envious, their former comrades on the left started sniping at them in magazines. "Can an all-white group sing songs from Negro culture?" asked one.

The answer, of course, lay in the song that Seeger called "Wimoweh". His version was faithful to the Zulu original in almost all respects save for the finger-popping rhythm, which was arguably a bit white for some tastes. The true test lay in the singing, and here Seeger passed with flying colours, bawling and howling his heart out, tearing up his vocal cords so badly that by the time he reached seventy-five he was almost mute. "Wimoweh" was by far the edgiest song in the Weavers' set, which is perhaps why they waited a year after their big breakthrough before recording it.
Like their earlier recordings, it took place with Gordon Jenkins presiding and an orchestra in attendance. Prior to this, Jenkins had been very subdued in his instrumental approach, adding just the occasional sting and the odd swirl of strings to the Weavers' cheery singalongs. Maybe he was growing bored, because his arrangement of "Wimoweh" was a great Vegas-y explosion of big-band raunch that almost equalled the barbaric splendour of the Zulu original. Trombones blared. Trumpets screamed. Strings swooped and soared through Solomon's miracle melody. And then Pete cut loose with all that hollering and screaming. It was a startling departure from everything else the Weavers had ever done, but Billboard loved it, anointing it a Pick of the Week. Cash Box said, "May easily break". Variety said, "Terrific!"

But around this time Variety also said, five more h'woodites named reds and chaplin being investigated. It was January 1952, and America was engaged in a frenzied hunt for Reds under beds. The House Un-American Affairs Committee was probing Hollywood. Red Channels had just published the names of artists with Commie connections. And in Washington, D.C., one Harvey Matusow was talking to federal investigators.

Matusow was a weaselly little man who had once worked alongside Pete Seeger in Peoples' Artists, a reddish front that dispatched folk singers to entertain on picket lines and in union halls. Harvey had undergone a change of heart and decided to tell all about his secret life in the Communist underground. On February 6th, 1952, just as "Wimoweh" made its chart debut, he stepped up to a mike before the House Un-American Affairs Committee and told one of the looniest tales of the entire McCarthy era. Evil Reds, he said, were "preying on the sexual weakness of American youth" to lure recruits into their dreaded movement. What's more, he was willing to name names of Communist Party members, among them three Weavers - including Pete Seeger.

The yellow press went apeshit. Reporters called the Ohio club where the Weavers were scheduled to play that night, demanding to know why the Yankee Inn was providing succor to the enemy. The show was canned, and it was all downhill from there. Radio stations banned their records. TV appearances were cancelled. "Wimoweh" plummeted from Number Six into oblivion. Nightclub owners wouldn't even talk to the Weavers' agents, and then Decca dropped them too. By the end of the year they'd packed it in, and Pete Seeger was back where he'd started, teaching folk songs to kids for a pittance.

So the Weavers were dead, but "Wimoweh" lived on, bewitching jazz ace Jimmy Dorsey, who covered it in 1952, and the sultry Yma Sumac, whose cocktail-lounge version caused a minor stir a few years later. Toward the end of the decade, it was included on Live From the Hungry I, a monstrously popular LP by the Kingston Trio that stayed on the charts for more than three years (178 weeks), peaking at Number Two. By now, almost everyone in America knew the basic refrain, so it would have come as no particular surprise to find four nice Jewish teenagers popping their fingers and going ah-weem-oh-way, ah-weem-oh-way in the summer of 1961.

The Tokens were clean-cut Brooklyn boys who had grown up listening to DJs Alan Freed and Murray the K, and the dreamy teen stylings of Dion and the Belmonts and the Everly Brothers. Hank Medress and Jay Siegel met at Lincoln High, where they sang in a doo-wop quartet that briefly featured Neil Sedaka. Phil Margo was a budding drummer and piano player, also from Lincoln High, and Mitch Margo was his kid brother, age fourteen. One presumes that girls were already making eyes in their direction, because the Tokens had recently been on TV's American Bandstand, decked out in double-breasted mohair suits with white shirts and purple ties, singing their surprise Top Twenty hit, "Tonight I Fell in Love".

And now they were moving toward even greater things. Barely out of high school, they landed a three-record deal with RCA Victor, with a $10,000 advance and a crack at working with Hugo Peretti and Luigi Creatore, ace producers of Jimmy Rodgers,
Frankie Lymon and many, many others. These guys worked with Elvis Presley, for God's sake. "To us this was big", says Phil Margo. "Very big".

The Tokens knew "Wimoweh" through their lead singer, Jay, who'd learned it off an old Weavers album. It was one of the songs they'd sung when they auditioned for Huge and Luge, their nickname for the hotshot Italians. The producers said, yeah, great, but what's it about? "Eating lions", said the Tokens. That's what some joker at the South African consulate had told them, at any rate: It was a Zulu hunting song with lyrics that went, "Hush, hush. If everyone's quiet, we'll have lion meat to eat tonight."

The producers presumably rolled their eyes. None of this got anyone anywhere in the era of "shooby doo" and so on. They wanted to revamp the song, give it some intelligible lyrics and a contemporary feel. They sent for one George David Weiss, a suave young dude in a navy-blue blazer, presently making a big name for himself in yesterday's music, writing orchestrations for Doris Day, Peggy Lee and others of that sort. The Tokens took him for a hopeless square until they discovered that he'd co-written "Can't Help Falling in Love With You" for Elvis Presley. That changed everything.

So George Weiss took "Wimoweh" home with him and gave it a careful listen. A civilized chap with a Juilliard degree, he didn't much like the primitive wailing, but the underlying chant was OK, and parts of the melody were very catchy. So he dismantled the song, excised all the hollering and screaming, and put the rest back together in a new way. The chant remained unchanged, but the melody - Solomon Linda's miracle melody - moved to center stage, becoming the tune itself, to which the new words were sung: "In the jungle, the mighty jungle" and so on.

In years to come, Weiss was always a bit diffident about his revisions, describing them as "gimmicks", as if ashamed to be associated with so frothy a bit of pop nonsense. Phil Margo says that's because Weiss stole The Tokens' ideas and wrote nothing save thirty-three words of doggerel, but that's another lawsuit entirely. What concerns us here is the song's bloodline, and everyone agrees on that: "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" was a reworking of "Wimoweh", which was a copy of "Mbube".

Solomon Linda was buried under several layers of pop-rock stylings, but you could still see him beneath the new song's slick surface, like a mastodon entombed in a block of clear ice.

The song was recorded live in RCA's Manhattan studios on July 21st, 1961, with an orchestra in attendance and some session players on guitar, drums and bass. The percussionist muted his timpani, seeking that authentic "jungle drum" sound. A moonlighting opera singer named Anita Darien practiced her scales. Conductor Sammy Lowe tapped his baton and off they went, three Tokens doing the wimowehs, while Jay Siegal took the lead with his pure falsetto and Darien swooped and dove in the high heavens, singing the haunting counter melodies that were one of the song's great glories. Three takes (again), a bit of overdubbing, and that was more or less that. Everyone went home, entirely blind as to what they'd accomplished. The Tokens were mortified by the new lyrics, which struck them as un-teen and uncool. Hugo and Luigi were so casual that they did the final mix over the telephone, and RCA topped them all by issuing the song as the B side of a humdrum tune called "Tina", which sank like lead.

Weird, no? We're talking about a pop song so powerful that Brian Wilson had to pull off the road when he first heard it, totally overcome; a song that Carole King instantly pronounced "a motherfucker". But it might never have reached their ears if an obscure DJ named Dick Smith in Worcester, Massachusetts, hadn't flipped the Tokens' new turkey and given the B side a listen. Smith said, "Holy shit, this is great", or words to that effect, and _____ put "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" on heavy rotation. The
The song broke out regionally, hit the national charts in November and reached Number One in four giant strides.

Within a month, Karl Denver's cover was Number One in England, too. By April 1962 the song was topping charts almost everywhere and heading for immortality. Miriam Makeba sang her version at JFK's last birthday party, moments before Marilyn Monroe famously lisped, "Happy Birthday, Mister President!". Apollo astronauts listened to it on the takeoff pads at Cape Canaveral. It was covered by the Springfields, the Spinners, the Tremeloes and Glen Campbell. In 1972 it returned to the charts, at Number Three, in a version by Robert John. Brian Eno recorded it in 1975. In 1982 it was back at Number One in the U.K., this time performed by Tight Fit. R.E.M. did it, as did the Nylons and They Might Be Giants. Manu Dibango did a twist version. Some Germans turned it into heavy metal. A sample cropped up on a rap epic titled "Mash up da Nation". Disney used the song in The Lion King, and then it got into the smash-hit theatrical production of the same title, currently playing to packed houses in six cities around the world. It's on the original Broadway cast recording, on dozens of kiddie CDs with cuddly lions on their covers and on an infinite variety of nostalgia compilations. It's more than sixty years old, and still it's everywhere.

What might all this represent in songwriter royalties and associated revenues? I put the question to lawyers around the world, and they scratched their heads. Around 160 recordings of three versions? Thirteen movies? Half a dozen TV commercials and a hit play? Number Seven on Val Pak's semi-authoritative ranking of the most-beloved golden oldies, and ceaseless radio airplay in every corner of the planet? It was impossible to accurately calculate, to be sure, but no one blanched at $15 million. Some said 10, some said 20, but most felt that $15 million was in the ballpark.

Which raises an even more interesting question: What happened to all that loot?

Where Does the Lion Sleep Tonight? - Part 2

Mbube - letters links & feedback - January 2004

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