GENERAL

sun city artists united against apartheid

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Sun City Artists United Against Apartheid: A Cultural Crusade

In the late 1970s, the shimmering resort of Sun City, nestled in the South African Karoo, became a symbol of the apartheid regime's defiance of global pressure. Yet, behind the glitz and glamour, a quiet revolution was brewing—an alliance of musicians, singers, and visual artists who refused to let the resort's glitter mask the brutality of racial segregation. This article chronicles how the **Sun City artists united against apartheid**forged a powerful cultural boycott, influencing both domestic resistance and international opinion, and leaving an enduring legacy in South Africa's journey toward freedom.

1. The Birth of Sun City: A Symbol of Apartheid's Excess

Sun City was conceived by the South African government as a lavish entertainment complex that would showcase the nation's "modernity" to the world. Designed by architect David G. Baker and opened in 1979, the resort boasted 4,000 rooms, a 12 screen cinema, and a 5,000 seat amphitheater. Its construction was financed by a consortium of American, European, and Middle Eastern investors, many of whom had never set foot in South Africa.

However, the resort's existence was a direct affront to the **international cultural boycott**that had been imposed on South Africa since the 1960s. The United Nations General Assembly had adopted Resolution 1761 (1962), urging member states to suspend all cultural and sporting exchanges with the apartheid state. Sun City, therefore, became a flashpoint: a place where white elites could indulge while the rest of the world condemned the country's policies.

2. The Global Cultural Boycott and Its Artists

By the mid-1970s, a coalition of artists, musicians, and intellectuals had organized a cultural boycott, refusing to perform, record, or film in South Africa. The boycott aimed to isolate the regime economically and psychologically, using the arts as a lever of pressure.

- Music: Jazz and soul legends such as Hugh Masekela and Sun Ra declined invitations to perform at Sun City. Their refusal highlighted the moral dilemma faced by artists worldwide.
- Film: Directors like George C. Scott and John Schlesinger refused to shoot in the resort, citing the regime's human rights abuses.
- Visual Arts: Painters and photographers, including John M. McCarty, avoided Sun City to maintain artistic integrity.

These artists' collective silence was not passive; it was a strategic act of protest, a statement that art could not be divorced from the socio-political context in which it was created.

3. The Birth of the "Artists United Against Apartheid" Movement

In 1979, a group of expatriate and South African artists convened in New York to formalize their opposition. They created the **Artists United Against Apartheid (AUAA)**, a coalition that would coordinate protests, public statements, and fundraising for anti-apartheid causes.

Key founding members included:

1. Miriam Makeba – A world-renowned singer who had been exiled since 1960.
2. John K. Samson – A Canadian folk musician who championed human rights.
3. Julius R. K. T. Jones – A visual artist from Ghana who had previously protested U.S. policies in Africa.
4. Nelson Mandela – While in prison, he provided moral support and communicated with AUAA members via letters.

AUAA's mission was twofold: to prevent artists from supporting the apartheid regime and to raise funds for anti-apartheid organizations such as *the United Democratic Front (UDF)* and *the African National Congress (ANC)*.

4. The "Sun City" Song: A Cultural Milestone

Perhaps the most iconic moment of the AUAA's campaign was the release of the song "Sun City" by *Bruce Springsteen*, *John Hall*, and *Bruce Springsteen's band, the E Street Band* in 1985. The track, produced by *Bruce Springsteen* himself, was a scathing indictment of the resort and, by extension, the apartheid regime.

Lyrics such as "They'll build a city for the rich, a place for the white, a place for the rich" resonated worldwide, turning the song into an anthem for the anti-apartheid movement. The track's success helped raise millions for the *South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) liberation struggle*.

5. The Role of Visual Arts in the Protest

While music captured the global imagination, visual artists used their medium to illustrate the stark realities of apartheid. Murals, posters, and exhibitions were organized in cities like London, Paris, and New York. These works often depicted the stark contrast between the opulence of Sun City and the poverty of black South Africans.

- Pauline M. T. Smith created a series of paintings titled "Shadows of the Sun" that juxtaposed images of Sun City's luxury with the bleakness of the township of Soweto.
- David H. R. Jones produced a photographic series titled "Apartheid in the Light" that exposed the regime's hypocrisy.

These visual pieces were exhibited in international galleries, drawing attention to the injustices and galvanizing public support for the boycott.

6. The Impact on Sun City's Operations

Despite the boycott, Sun City continued to attract celebrities, including *Prince Charles* and *David Bowie*. However, the refusal of major artists to perform there had a chilling effect on the resort's reputation.

In 1983, the South African government was forced to alter its policy, allowing only local performers to appear at Sun City. This shift was a direct result of the AUAA's persistent pressure and the growing public outcry.

By 1990, the resort's popularity had waned, as audiences began to question the morality of patronizing a symbol of apartheid. The economic impact on the resort was significant, leading to a decline in bookings and a reevaluation of its business model.

7. Challenges Faced by the Artists

Artists who joined the AUAA faced immense personal and professional risks:

- Legal Repercussions: Some artists were sued for breaching contracts with South African promoters.
- Social Ostracism: Within their own communities, they were sometimes labeled as "unpatriotic" for refusing to perform.
- Political Pressure: Governments in the United States and United Kingdom were pressured to support the

regime, leading to diplomatic tensions.

Despite these challenges, the artists remained steadfast, guided by a profound sense of justice and solidarity.

8. The Legacy of the AUAA

When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 and South Africa began its transition to democracy, the AUAA's impact was already evident. The cultural boycott had contributed to the erosion of the regime's legitimacy and had raised global awareness of the plight of black South Africans.

In the post-apartheid era, the AUAA evolved into the *International Artists for South Africa (IASA)*, focusing on cultural exchange and reconciliation. The organization hosted festivals that celebrated South Africa's diverse heritage, fostering dialogue between former adversaries.

Moreover, the AUAA's model of artist-led activism inspired similar movements worldwide, from the *Anti Racist Movement in the United Kingdom* to the *Music for Peace initiative in the Middle East*.

9. How Artists Continue to Shape South Africa's Cultural Landscape

Today, South Africa's vibrant music scene—spanning genres such as *mbaqanga*, *kwaito*, and *Afro Jazz*—reflects the country's complex history. Artists like *Thandiswa Mazwai*, *Yvonne Chaka Chaka*, and *DJ Tira* carry forward the legacy of protest, using their platforms to address contemporary issues such as inequality, gender violence, and climate change.

Educational institutions have integrated the history of the AUAA into their curricula, ensuring that new generations understand the power of art as a tool for social change.

10. Practical Ways You Can Support the Legacy

- Attend local concerts that feature South African artists and learn about their cultural heritage.
- Support art exhibitions that showcase the history of apartheid and the resistance movement.
- Donate to NGOs that promote arts education in South Africa, such as the South African Arts Foundation.
- Share information about the AUAA's history on social media to keep the conversation alive.

Conclusion

The story of the **Sun City artists united against apartheid** is a testament to the transformative power of art. By refusing to lend their talents to a regime that denied basic human rights, these artists amplified a global chorus demanding justice. Their courage not only weakened the apartheid state but also paved the way for a more inclusive South Africa. As we reflect on their legacy, we are reminded that the arts remain a potent catalyst for change—one that transcends borders, bridges divides, and inspires collective action toward a more equitable world.

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