

In These Times, Season 4 | Music and Meaning (Episode 6)

Alex Schein:

In Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man*, the protagonist, one of the few survivors of a plague, searches for meaning in a world of loss, concluding that there is but one solution to the intricate riddle of life, to improve ourselves and contribute to the happiness of others.

In 2022, as COVID-19 lingers on, the climate threat looms larger, and war returns to Europe, there seems to be no answer to when this era defined by loss will end. And many of us are finding that making sense of the intricate riddle of life and extracting meaning out of adversity is one of the things that art does best. In this season of *In These Times*, we talk to scholars, musicians, and poets, and other members of creative communities, to explore the link between making art and making meaning, and how creativity shines a light on that way out of adversity, past and present. In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

In this episode, we speak with a professor of music about the power of song and dance to unite and inspire people during the apartheid era in South Africa and a college alum about his process composing for the screen in our very own OMNIA podcast. Welcome to Episode Six, Music and Meaning

If you've been listening to the *In These Times* podcast since we launched the series back in 2020, you've no doubt heard the musical talents of College of Arts and Sciences alum Nicholas Escobar.

Nicholas Escobar:

Hi, I'm Nicholas Escobar. I'm a music composer and a 2018 graduate of the college.

Alex Schein:

As a multimedia producer for Penn Arts and Sciences, I had worked with Nicholas on a film project about his senior honors thesis when he was an undergraduate. More on that later. So when the pandemic began and the scope of our production capabilities was limited to podcasting, I knew Nicholas was the ideal composer to help us with an original theme for this series. Fortunately, Nicholas agreed to work with us after having his own life and work disrupted by COVID.

Nicholas Escobar:

I was studying in Edinburgh actually, when the pandemic hit. I was getting my Master's degree in Music Composition for Film from the University of Edinburgh, through the Thouron Award, which is an award through the University of Pennsylvania. So I actually had to fly back in March of 2020. So the pandemic automatically disrupted, as it did with everyone, my life. And I've been living outside of Philadelphia in Villanova in my parents' house since then. And I've set up a studio here and it's been tough. I mean, I don't really want to complain because I'm sure people have had far worse experiences over the last two years than me. I think I've been quite fortunate, actually. But I think, if anything, as with everyone, the pandemic has sort of stalled a lot of the things that I've planned, which has been tough. And I've just had to work around that and just try to look to the future and just continue working on my music.

And I think music itself has really helped me. I learned how to play guitar over the last two years. And I've since gone from guitar to the mandolin to a dulcimer to the baritone ukulele and recently to the banjo. So learning new instruments, I think, is a great thing in any situation. But during the pandemic, I think it's been great because it sort of gives you a drive and you just improve every day. The banjo has been especially fun because it's just like a very happy instrument. It's hard to have a sad banjo, I think. Whenever you start playing the banjo, it's just like, yeah, this is a good time. So it sort of raises my mood.

Alex Schein:

Nicholas's interest in film composing started at an early age. He began composing music at the age of 12 and his earliest film score was for a movie that he made at home with his two younger brothers and some friends. Like many artists, Nicholas was influenced by the films and musical scores he heard as a kid.

Nicholas Escobar:

I like to think that films that I watched as a kid influenced my music composing, specifically the music from Toy Story. I just remember very clearly, Randy Newman's scores just so great and really pops. And even when I didn't understand what it was doing, I knew that it was telling a story and it was supporting the film and was really bringing it to life.

Excerpt from Toy Story 4):

(Singing)

Nicholas Escobar:

When I grew up, I was still looking to film scores, but with a more analytical lens, not purely enjoyment. And the music of John Williams was very influential to me. E.T., specifically, which is a great score. Thomas Newman was another person that I really looked to in my high school years, like his scored to Shawshank Redemption is brilliant.

Alex Schein:

Nicholas came to Penn after considering going to a musical conservatory for college.

Nicholas Escobar:

I realized that the sort of rigorous limited scope of the conservatory experience wasn't necessarily what I personally wanted. Partly because I loved studying history and the sciences and English while in high school and in middle school and I didn't really want to lose that sort of rigorous academic study if I went to a conservatory and just studied the musical aspect of everything. So that's why I switched looking at conservatories and looked at liberal arts schools and that's how I ended up at Penn. And thank goodness I did because the English Department of Penn is really world class. I absolutely loved my time in that department. I took classes ranging from modernist poetry to Shakespeare to John Milton to 19th century dime novels.

Alex Schein:

As an English major, Nicholas wound up composing a musical score for his senior honors thesis. The score is the first of its kind for an unfinished opera by 17th century poet and playwright John Dryden.

The opera is entitled *The State of Innocence* and was an operatic adaptation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The idea for the thesis was based on a paper he originally wrote for a class on John Milton during his sophomore year with Professor Zachary Lesser.

Nicholas Escobar:

He was actually the one that recommended that I look at *The State of Innocence* for my final paper for that semester for the John Milton class. So that's actually where I first encountered the work and Zachary Lesser became my thesis advisor and I pitched it to him that I wanted to sort of take the work that I did for that final paper, and then turn that into my senior thesis two years later. So it all stemmed from another Penn class on John Milton and Professor Lesser, who I took a Shakespeare class with my freshman year, knew that I had a background in music

For this project, I studied the music from the period because I wanted to make sure that it sounded like it could have been performed during Dryden's time. I didn't want to do a modern version of the score. So to do that, I had to really research the music from the time, composers from the time, in addition to just sort of my musical studies and understanding the theory behind that music from sort of the Restoration period in the late 17th century. Looking at composers like Henry Purcell and Matthew Locke, for example. Just really listening to that music, seeing how they used lyrics, because John Dryden did write lyrics, just from what I understand, no music was written for them so I used the lyrics that he wrote and wrote music for those lyrics.

So it was like I was sort of hanging out with Dryden at the time and we were talking and he was telling me what he wanted, but he was alive almost 400 years ago. So it was sort of that feeling, that was what I was trying to capture, as if we were collaborating. And the end result was that I did write a score. I hope to maybe get it recorded or produced someday. I think it would be cool to put on the opera. I think Dryden would be happy about that if we ended up making that happen. No plan to make that happen at this moment, but maybe sometime in the future.

Alex Schein:

The idea of bridging time through music has continued to inspire Nicholas's work as a film composer. For his Master's thesis at the University of Edinburgh, he scored music for Charlie Chaplin's silent film *The Immigrant* from 1917.

Nicholas Escobar:

When you're writing for silent film, I mean, it's a different type of experience because there's nothing else. There's no other sound in the film. It's all just silent so you're basically painting the screen with sound and you can have a massive effect on the mood, the tone, how the characters are perceived. It's like a massive responsibility, as it is with the sound film too. I mean, you can completely screw up a scene by writing bad music or music that doesn't fit.

Nicholas Escobar:

And maybe that's a part of the thrill of it is that you're trying to find the exact right sound. So in the case of the Chaplin film, it was just a massive amount of development work and sort of building up the soundscape. It just felt great when I was finished with it because I felt like I created a work that added a different, a modern sound, to a film that was made over 100 years ago.

Alex Schein:

Film is not the only medium where storytelling is affected by music. Since the heyday of radio in the mid 20th century, radio dramas and programs have used music and sound design to enhance storytelling

Voice, Orson Welles:

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows.

Alex Schein:

Today, serial podcasts like this show rely on music to create mood, communicate emotion, and underscore the meaning of an interview segment. In preparation for Season Two of *In These Times*, *Black Lives And The Call For Justice*, we once again turned to Nicholas to help us capture the appropriate mood for our podcast theme.

Nicholas Escobar:

The first season score is very different from the second season score. I recorded a ton of stuff for that season. I remember all these different sounds, all these different instruments. I was throwing sort of everything in there and then going back and layering everything so that it still sounded like a measured thing, even though there was just so much in there. And I'm sure that was drawn from the George Floyd protests and the insurrection and sort of this sense in the country where there was just this sort of rage that was right underneath the surface and it was really beginning to almost explode in some way.

Alex Schein:

As with our previous three seasons, Nicholas has a reworked his theme for *In These Times* for Season Four, *The Intricate Riddle of Life*.

Nicholas Escobar:

In this most recent season, the one that we're recording right now is for, I actually included the scores for all the other seasons and it's sort of in the palette of the score for the fourth season. So it sort of connects everything together. And the way I was able to do that was just to slow down the tracks in logic so that they're very slow and they sort of sound like drones, but there's still unique sound. And I like slowing things down because you sort of get these little artifacts and interesting sound elements. So in the fourth season of *In These Times*, the music, you can actually hear the first three seasons, which I think is funny and cool.

Alex Schein:

Like Nicholas, Professor Carol Muller was influenced by the music and experiences she had growing up. Muller is an ethnomusicologist and professor in Penn's Department of Music. She grew up in South Africa under apartheid, a system of institutionalized racial oppression that existed in the country from 1948 into the early 1990s. Her father is a Presbyterian minister and worked with both black and white ministers when the church was segregated.

Carol Muller:

He came to realize just the sort of evils of apartheid and used his faith as a way to say we're told to love God and love our neighbors. Who is our neighbor? So it was a kind of a deeply informing thing to grow up with my father doing. At some point he moved even out of the church pastoral ministry into what he

called the ministry of reconciliation. So he was talking to people across the board. He felt that everybody must figure out how to talk to each other whatever our differences. We had security, the security board tapping our phone. We knew that was all going on. And he just said, he was always honest. He just told people. And that was while I was an undergraduate in South Africa at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and I was studying ethnomusicology. And at the time, I didn't know, it was a brand new program. We had a German professor who started the program and out of that program, I learned to gumboot dance.

Alex Schein:

The gumboot dance is a South African dance performed by dancers wearing Wellington boots, more commonly called gumboots. The dance originated by migrant workers working in the gold mine tunnels where talking was strictly prohibited. The dancers would use a tapping code to communicate while in the mines, and then above ground, these taps and smacks developed into elaborate dances that were performed during leisure time.

Carol Muller:

And so gumboot dance is this amazing form, just extraordinary, that develops. It tells the story of what it is to be a miner for the people back home. And they put it into competition. But it does tell you a lot, and thank goodness they put it into some kind of dance form, because we'd have no record of that experience otherwise.

Carol Muller:

The style comes from watching tap dancing on Hollywood movies. The Nicholas brothers too.

Carol Muller:

And so it's like tap dancing with heavy boots on, but you're telling the story of what it is to be a miner. Then there'll be something like Germiston, which is the name of a mine, diamond, which is the name of diamonds. Do you know what I'm saying? So there all these ways in which that experience, that labor experience, gets put into the dance form.

And then there was a story during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that some of the witnesses to the crimes of apartheid were the Amabatra people who developed this form of dancing on the mines, because they were what they called the toilet people. They would go and clean out the latrines at night. And as they were cleaning, they became witnesses to the crimes of apartheid. The lowest in social status completely, even below Zulus, you know what I mean? Were the Amabatra. And they were the witnesses to some of the crimes of apartheid. Do you know what I mean? We can't dismiss music and dance.

Alex Schein:

Professor Muller spent her early academic career researching the music of Shembe, an African sect that combines Christianity with aspects of Zulu traditions. Also known as the Nazarite Church or the Nazareth Baptist Church, it was founded by the spiritual leader, Isaiah Shembe around 1910.

Carol Muller:

So he keeps all the cultural sides of Zulu tradition and it uses the Mission Bible, which is translated into Zulu in the 19th century. So some of the Shembe sites, one is called Bethlehem and one is called Judea.

Okay, because if you want your Bethlehem and Judea, we have ours here, physically, in this place, in KwaZulu-Natal, on the map. But it's also to tell their own stories of their own miracles. And those are told in the hymns. So you have a hymn book and it looks like a Wesleyan, a Methodist hymn book with verses and refrains. But each two lines of words can take 45 minutes to perform because everybody's taking it and just beautifully in the most amazingly improvisational way, taking those words and creating rhythm out of it. And you know you're singing the words of the founder because these were songs that were received in dreams, often through the sound of a young woman's voice and always with sacred dance. The dance is really, really important.

Carol Muller:

So if we didn't look at the song repertoire, we wouldn't know that history. We wouldn't know that response to colonialism. It's the only record that we have. I mean, they have also got all these miracle stories that they had a church secretary who wrote down. They're amazing. On scrolls, just like you see in the Old Testament. And we have these amazing ways in which people have taken the colonial thing and just twisted around to their own advantage. Are they highly empowered people in society? No, not at all, but it's a way of surviving.

And then to have the way in which that comes to you through Shembe has a vision and he has a dream and he teaches the rhythm to the people. There's no way you can dispute that. You can't stop it happening. It's happening in your body. It's your own truth. It's coming out. You share with your community and empower your community. And it takes a long time to learn that repertoire, so you have to be a member for a very long time to really become skilled at it too. But these are skilled improvisers, like tens of thousands of people. Now, the stars are all changing. There's radio and there's mass media and there's all kinds of other models for this kind of stuff. But if we don't look at the musical and the dance and the texts, we'd just be losing a whole piece of an understanding of history, of African history, of South African history.

Alex Schein:

Professor Muller was given special permission to work with Shembe communities, specifically with women and girls. Her research would later be published in her 1999 book *Rituals Of Fertility And The Sacrifice Of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa*. In 2010, she would edit a translation from Zulu to English of Shembe hymns, a project she had begun with ethnomusicologist Bongani Mthethwa just before his sudden death in 1991.

Carol Muller:

It was very dangerous. But when you were inside the communities and they have literally 40 or 50 different sacred sites in KwaZulu-Natal, I mean, you take your shoes off, you wear a white prayer gown. You do as you have to do, but you are safe. It's a place of sanctuary. When we open our ears and our lives and our experiences to those of others who are generous and letting us in, and I just have to say I am a totally different person than I would've been before Shembe and before gumboot dancing, you have to take some risks sometimes, as others are taking risks to just live their lives.

Speaker 6:

(Singing)

Alex Schein:

Many South African artists and musicians were forced into political exile during the apartheid regime. Artists such as Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, and Abdullah Ibrahim, formerly known as Dollar Brand, use their music as a voice for freedom for South Africans living under the oppression of apartheid. Professor Muller remembers first listening to some of Abdullah Ibrahim's music and the impact that it had on her.

Carol Muller:

I did a South African jazz class as an undergraduate. We had hardly any material except what the professor had gone and collected himself. But we knew there were musicians who lived in exile and we could listen. We had in our library, music library at UKZN, the recordings of many of the musicians who were living in exile and who were banned in South Africa. We could listen to them as long as we wrote down on a piece of paper for the government every track we listened to. So we listened. Chris Ballantine was the person who was doing this work. And he had provided for us some tapes. There were cassette tapes of the music that he had collected.

And one weekend I listened to the music of Dollar Brand, Abdullah Ibrahim. And I read all his stuff on his conversion to Islam. It was just the most, I had never heard music like this before. And I was in a music program that taught European music. I didn't connect. I love Bach and I love Beethoven, but I don't feel it's my music. Do you know what I mean? And it was I think a lot of people feel that kind of emptiness of lack of connection. And I listened to Abdullah, and it's probably because it had all the church hymns in the background, everything I knew. There was some way in which I deeply connected to it.

Alex Schein:

In 1990, Nelson Mandela, civil rights leader and the future President of South Africa was released from prison marking the beginning of the end of apartheid. At the time Professor Muller was in New York City, earning her PhD in ethnomusicology at NYU.

Carol Muller:

Mandela was released and I was in New York. I was walking down the street and I saw he was going to be released on the news, the headlines. And I was like, "Oh my God, this is incredible." Nobody expected it. It's 1990. And that night there was a big celebration at the Riverside Church in New York.

Alex Schein:

While attending the celebration, Professor Muller happened to run into Abdullah Ibrahim, whom she had already met shortly before Mandela was released.

Carol Muller:

He was standing outside Riverside Church. And I said to him, "Oh, I would love to talk to you." And he said, "Well, call me." So I called him, but he was already in India by the time I called him and his wife Sathima answered. And that was the beginning of a project with her.

Carol Muller:

It was just amazing. Nobody wanted to talk to women and she felt very pushed aside. And I said, "Well, I'm starting to be interested in women in jazz. Would you talk to me?" And she said, "Yes. When do you

want to meet?" Just like that. I asked her one question and she talked for like two hours. But she wouldn't let me bring a recorder because there was so much suspicion at the time. Nobody knew who anybody was and Abdullah did check up on me.

Speaker 7:

(Singing)

Alex Schein:

Ibrahim's wife, Sathima Bea Benjamin, was a jazz vocalist and composer, who like her husband was also in political exile during apartheid. Professor Muller's work with Sathima would start as a semester project at NYU and would turn into a 20 year project that would culminate in the 2011 book *Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking In Jazz*, which tells the story of Benjamin's life and career in music. Benjamin came to know American jazz and popular music through the radio, movies, records, and live stage and dance band performances.

Carol Muller:

So she grew up in what South Africa called the colored community, so mixed race. Her family was from the island of Saint Helena in the Atlantic Ocean. And they came in the late 19th century to Cape Town. They set themselves apart quite a bit from other people of mixed race because they considered themselves British. So that was also an interesting kind of thing. But Sathima in a way was a rebel. So she went to teacher's training college. She trained as a teacher, but she always sang. She was always listening to music. And there was a gramophone player in the house. And so her whole life experience is listening to the gramophone and to BBC radio.

So she heard all that music in the sort of 19. She was born in 1936, and in the 1940s and 50s. And she became a kind of night club singer. And she started listening to Duke Ellington and to Billie Holiday. Those were the two very formative, very important American musicians that she consumed in a very close and passionate way when she was growing up. But she was listening to Duke Ellington's music when she met Abdullah, who was Dollar Brand at the time, and they kind of connected over Duke Ellington's song *I Got It Bad*. Both of them were working on it at the time.

They connected. They left the country in the early '60s and Abdullah had a little trio. They were in Switzerland, living in an international student house. And Abdullah had a trio in night club for like six months or something and Sathima heard that Duke Ellington was in town. And he went to him and made him come and listen to Abdullah. And that changed his life. It didn't change her life in quite the way it could have. Duke Ellington, I mean, great musician as he is, was also an A&R man for Frank Sinatra's Reprise Records label. And so he set up a recording in Paris, like after the weekend, took them on the train. They went and Sathima sang.

He said to her, "What do you do?" And she said, "I sing sometimes." He said, "Well, then, sing." And he actually accompanies her, which is very unusual. He had to find the key because she plays and sings in all the flats. Anyway, there was a recording of Sathima singing enough to make like a CD, but it was never issued because Frank Sinatra apparently said it wasn't commercial enough. And Abdullah, that launched its career. It was the Dollar Brand Trio, Duke Ellington presents. So that got him going, but it didn't get her going. And the tapes got lost.

Alex Schein:

This 1963 recording with Ellington and Benjamin would remain lost until the mid 1990s when it was discovered that the engineer who recorded the session had made his own private recording. The album, *A Morning In Paris*, was released in 1996

Speaker 9:

(Singing)

Carol Muller:

So she launched the CD in the mid 1990s in Carnegie Hall. It was the most beautiful event. She had a, I remember, Philadelphia violinist who joined it because she'd had a pizzicato violin on the original thing. It was the most amazing thing.

Alex Schein:

The musical conversation between American and South African jazz artists is just one of the many examples of the power of music to inspire and create healing out of struggle. Recently, Professor Muller was awarded a 2021 Klein Family Social Justice grant for a project that aims to create a therapeutically informed, sustainable music technology program at West Philadelphia High School

Carol Muller:

The idea is that we want to do creative work. So we want students who are listening all the time to electronically produced music, boys in Beatz, hip hop, whatever you want to call it, and get them to create their own music. Move a little bit away from the very kind of band orchestra, although that's also part of what they're doing. It's not really what I'm doing, but that we put software onto computers and we get students creating their own music. We get them certified in one of the music technology languages. Maybe they do a course at Philadelphia Community College so by the time they finish high school, they've got a product. They have got a certification in a language, and they maybe can move on to a job or create their own.

So we decided we wanted to do a kind of a track, like a computing track, that would be social-emotional wellness. So if students are addressed in understanding what's happening to them emotionally. We do a class on music technology, and then we do two other classes. I had originally thought, well, maybe we do a history of hip hop starting with New York so they could get a sense of black music history. I have come to understand because I didn't, and amazing that I'd been Philly so long and didn't really know this, that gospel music matters, the music of Islam matters, all these things matter, but 1970s Philadelphia soul. There's a story of Philadelphia hip hop. There are all these different categories, but we haven't written about them. It's time.

Alex Schein:

Looking back, Professor Muller reflects on the importance of music, not only during the movement against apartheid, but in the ongoing struggles we face individually and collectively.

Carol Muller:

I think the work of music is to bring people together. If you're singing together, if you're singing about things, even if you're singing in code, like the COVID thing is making me realize just how important

connection to people is and what is the feeling for way to connect us through music? It's the immediate way in which we connect. I think we have lost a sense of the central force of music, in human survival, in human thriving. And we've lost a sense of community. When we realize we need to be connected to each other, music is that force that connects. It is interesting. I mean, it is interesting that music is so threatening, because it makes people feel, feel something, and you can understand why it feels very threatening when you don't have also that same music tradition behind you, maybe. You know what I mean? And I think music, it makes us just feel good. It makes us feel alive. It has a power that we can't really contain.

Alex Schein:

This concludes Episode Six of In These Times, The Intricate Riddle Of Life. Join us in two weeks for our final episode of the season, where we'll talk with faculty experts about making meaning through the visual arts.

The OMNIA podcast is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Nicholas Escobar and Professor Carol Muller. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

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