

“Beware, Verwoerd” Reflection

While the apartheid system put in place during 1948 caused extreme hardships for many native South Africans, the harsh political climate gave birth to some of the region’s most influential pieces of music. One of the most popular pieces written during this time, “Ndodemnyama we Verwoerd”, also known as “Beware Verwoerd”, was written in the 1950s by one of South Africa’s most essential apartheid era songwriters, Vuyisile Mini. Performed by arguably the most popular female South African performer at the time, Miriam Makeba, this short, catchy song would become one of the most popular anthems for native South Africans suffering under apartheid era law.

Translated to English, the chorus comes in the form of an upbeat verse that is repeated throughout song, shouting, “Here is the black man, Verwoerd! Watch out, here is the black man, Verwoerd!” This serves as a direct warning to the current Prime Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd. Despite the song’s serious message and setting, “Beware Verwoerd” is just as infectious as any other mainstream pop song written during at the time. This upbeat and infectious nature made the song the perfect rallying cry for native South Africans to turn to during acts of civil disobedience. While many other songs composed under apartheid contained subtler references to the hardships faced by natives, “Beware, Verwoerd” took a far more direct approach that both sparked outrage in the white minority which supported the segregationist policies of the time, while also inspiring the suppressed African majority to persevere through their struggle. Overall, “Beware, Verwoerd” served as one of the coextensive moments between music and politics that native South Africans needed the most to endure one of the darkest times in the region’s history.

Trey McAdams