

An Interview With Govan Mbeki

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"People singing, they would march into battle with music. Now under modern conditions. you get armies. They have big bands. Music! But with the ordinary people it is the voices. They use their voices. And, they will go anywhere. " Govan Mbeki, 1999

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In 1999, the University of Fort Hare Library conducted an oral history interview with Govan Mbeki on the role that music played in the struggle and on Robben Island.

Mbeki was imprisoned in Section B of Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and the other men convicted in the 1963 Rivonia Trial. They remained in prison for over 20 years. During that time, Mbeki learned to play the guitar. He and two other guitarists formed a band and played together in their cells.

The University of Fort Hare Library is custodian of the ANC Archives and collections of personal papers. Govan Mbeki deposited a portion of his personal papers, including his guitar and the hand-written music he and the others played from.

This paper will include excerpts and anecdotes from the interview with Mbeki, a look at the music they sang, and the role that music played in buoying the spirits of the prisoners and continuing the fight. Though many of the songs were simple, western love songs, the mere act of singing bound the men in a cultural solidarity against the prison system. The act of making music overreached the content of the songs, and reinforced the identity of men who were freedom fighters, not just prisoners.