

# Non-Diegetic Characterisation in African Film Music: A Case of *Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva*



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines how music functions as an autonomous narrative force that creates non-diegetic characters in African cinema, challenging traditional conceptions of film music as mere accompaniment. The research employs qualitative textual analysis methodology to investigate the interplay between music, lyrics, and narrative in two contemporary African crime films: *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema* (2008) and *Viva Riva* (2010). Through detailed examination of musical compositions, lyrical content, instrumentation, and socio-historical contexts, this analysis reveals that music operates on two distinct levels of characterisation: explicit characterisation through lyrical personas and implicit characterisation through composers' socio-political perspectives. The findings demonstrate that musical elements introduce additional narrative agents, including lyrical voices, instrumental motifs, and composers' ideological imprints, that function as independent characters within the cinematic discourse. These musical characters, exemplified by figures such as the proud mother in Brenda Fassie's "Vulindlela" and the disillusioned lumberjack in Franklin Boukaka's "Le Bucheron," provide socio-cultural commentary that enriches narrative complexity beyond visual storytelling. The study concludes that music in African cinema transcends traditional background scoring to become a vital narrative tool that embeds social memory, cultural identity, and political critique into cinematic expression. This research contributes to African film scholarship by establishing a theoretical framework for understanding music's characterization potential and advocating for recognizing musicians as implicit narrative collaborators in contemporary African filmmaking.

*Keywords: Film Music, Characterisation, Musical Persona, Musician, Sonic elements, Sonic narration*

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase "Arrest the Music!", as articulated by Tejumola Olaniyan<sup>1</sup> alludes to the defiant music and activism of Fela Kuti, implying that the music bears responsibility for its impact. In African cinema, music transcends its traditional role as a mere accompaniment, emerging as a vital narrative force deeply embedded in the continent's cultural and social contexts. Rooted in oral storytelling traditions, music carries histories, identities, and collective memories, forging connections between audiences and their lived experiences. African filmmakers draw on these traditions to craft narratives that assert cultural authenticity and challenge colonial stereotypes, positioning music as a cornerstone of cinematic storytelling.<sup>2</sup> However, while music's aesthetic and emotional contributions are widely acknowledged, its

<sup>1</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music!: Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Ian W. Gerg, "Sonic Space in Djibril Diop Mambety's Films by Vlad Dima," *Notes* 74, no. 3 (2018): 457–60, <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.2018.0021>.

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capacity to act as an autonomous narrative agent - creating characters that shape the story beyond the visual frame - remains underexplored in African film scholarship.

This gap raises a critical question: Why has the narrative agency of music, particularly its role in generating non-diegetic characters, been overlooked in African cinema compared to Western cinema? In Western cinema, scholars such as Claudia Gorbman have framed music as “unheard melodies” that operate subliminally, a perspective that undervalues its active narrative potential.<sup>3</sup> In African cinema, however, music’s explicit engagement with socio-political issues and cultural identities suggests a more prominent role, one that introduces lyrical personas, instrumental motifs, and composers’ voices as narrative characters. This article addresses this oversight by examining how music functions as a character-creating force in African films using Gangster’s Paradise: *Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva* as case studies to argue their narrative significance.

The power of music in these films lies in its ability to weave local and global discourses into the narrative of the film. Genres such as mbaqanga, kwaito, and rumba, with their rhythmic vitality and lyrical depth, reflect urban African life and engage with global musical conversations, infusing films with a sense of place and identity.<sup>4</sup> In *Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva*, music creates non-diegetic characters such as a proud mother in Brenda Fassie’s *Vulindlela* or a disillusioned lumberjack in Franklin Boukaka’s *Le Bucheron*—that comment on post-apartheid struggles and postcolonial corruption. These musical characters, alongside composers’ socio-political imprints, enrich the narrative, challenging the notion that music merely supports a visual story.

To investigate this phenomenon, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology, focusing on the interplay between the music, lyrics, and narrative in *Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva*. Textual analysis is well-suited for dissecting the semiotic and cultural dimensions of film music, allowing for a detailed examination of how songs and composers contribute to characterisation.<sup>5</sup> By analysing lyrics, instrumentation, and socio-historical contexts, this approach reveals the narrative roles of musical characters, supported by theoretical frameworks such as Michel Chion’s ‘acousmetre’ concept, which posits sound as an independent narrative voice.<sup>6</sup> This methodology, widely used in film music studies, ensures a rigorous exploration of the agency of music in African cinema.

This article argues that music in African cinema functions as an autonomous narrative force that creates non-diegetic characters, enriching the storytelling of *Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva* with sociocultural and political depth. This study aims to examine how these musical characteristics, manifested through lyrics, instrumentation, and composers’ identities, shape the narrative and thematic complexity of these films, revealing music’s integral role in African cinematic expression.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The complex interplay between music and narrative in film, particularly the way musical compositions evoke implied characters that interact with on-screen figures, can be effectively analysed through two theoretical frameworks: neo-Riemannian theory and the diegetic/non-diegetic distinction in film music studies.

Neo-Riemannian theory, initially developed within the field of musicology, has been effectively applied to the analysis of film music to elucidate how chromatic harmonic progressions contribute to emotional subtexts and narrative tension.<sup>7</sup> This theoretical framework examines transformations between triads, such as parallel, leading-tone, and relative operations, which can symbolise shifting psychological states or the presence of unseen forces within a film's diegesis. For instance, abrupt harmonic shifts may serve as "musical characters," whose presence is perceived through thematic materials that interact with the narrative, thereby generating tension and influencing audience interpretation.

Gorbman's influential work on the differentiation between diegetic music (music that exists within the narrative world of the film) and non-diegetic music (external background score) offers a framework

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Indiana University Press, 1987); .

<sup>4</sup> Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa* (A&C Black, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> James Buhler, *Theories of the Soundtrack* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Edward Gollin and Alexander Rehding, *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Riemannian Music Theories*, ed. Edward Gollin and Alexander Rehding (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195321333.001.0001>.

for comprehending how music can function as an implied character.<sup>8</sup> Non-diegetic music, in particular, frequently acts as a narrative agent, providing commentary on the action or embodying thematic elements that interact with on-screen characters. For example, Bernard Herrmann's use of dissonant strings in *Psycho* (1960) illustrates how non-diegetic music can represent the psychological presence of an off-screen character, thereby influencing the audience's emotional response and interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

In summarising these theoretical perspectives, Gabriel Thuku Kimani asserts that music in film fulfils roles in two narrative dimensions, which he identifies as thematic rendition, plotting, location, mood establishment, and characterization.<sup>10</sup> These theories suggest that film music is not merely an accompaniment but an active participant in narrative construction, capable of evoking implied characters and influencing audience perception through both harmonic and narrative means.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative textual analysis to examine how musical elements create non-diegetic characters in African cinema. Two films were selected through purposive sampling: *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem* and *Viva Riva*.<sup>11</sup> These case studies were chosen for their prominent integration of local musical traditions, representation of contemporary African urban contexts, and explicit engagement with socio-political themes through musical selections.

The analytical process involved examination of song lyrics in original languages and translations, investigation of instrumental arrangements and harmonic progressions, research into musicians' biographical and political backgrounds, examination of cultural contexts surrounding musical selections, and assessment of how musical elements interact with visual narratives. Data collection included multiple film viewings, lyrical transcription and translation, biographical research, and analysis of socio-historical contexts. Despite the small sample limiting generalisability, this focused approach provided substantial insight into how music creates narrative characters in contemporary African filmmaking.

## Musical Characterisation in African Crime Films

In African crime films, music plays a crucial role in character development and the narrative structure. An exploration of this phenomenon reveals two distinct levels of characterization: explicit and implicit. Explicit characterization arises from lyrics and melodies that name or give voice to characters, thereby enriching the narrative. In contrast, implicit characterization emerges from the composers' perspectives, with their social views intricately woven into musical notes. This implicit characterization functions as an unseen narrator, contributing to the story.

These methods are instrumental in shaping the genre's auditory narrative, effectively linking sound with plot and theme. For instance, in the film "Jerusalem", Brenda Fassie's song "Vulindlela" vividly represents a community. The song portrays the joy of a proud mother and her son through montages of Lucky's early heists, embodying post-apartheid hope and seamlessly integrating music with the narrative arcs. Similarly, in *Viva Riva*, Franklin Boukaka's "Le Bucheron" evokes the image of a weary labourer. Boukaka's poignant voice, infused with his activism, reflects the turmoil in Congo, thereby enhancing the film's gritty realism.

Composers such as Fassie and Boukaka, renowned for their rebellious spirit, infused their defiance into their music. Their personal experiences shape the significance of music, creating silent figures that critique societal norms. This examination of *Jerusalem* and *Viva Riva* illustrates how music constructs characters, enhances African crime narratives, and propels the storylines forward.

### LYRICS

*Vulindlela we Mamgobhozi*  
*Hhe unyana wami helele*

### TRANSLATION

Open the path/ way, Mamgobhozi  
Hhe my son helele

<sup>8</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*.

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Mather, "Royal S. Brown. Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. x, 396 Pp. ISBN 0-520-08320-2 (Paperback)," *Canadian University Music Review* 19, no. 1 (1998): 120, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014619ar>.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Thuku Kimani, *Sound Design in Film: A Kenyan Cinema Book Series*. (Nairobi: Utafiti Foundation, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ziman, "Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem," *South Africa: DV8 Films, 2008. Film.*, 2008; Djo Tunda Wa Munga, "Viva Riva!," *Democratic Republic of Congo: MG Productions, 2010. Film.*, 2010.

Uyashada namhlanje  
 Vulindlela wena Manyawuza  
 Bengingazi ngiyombona umakoti  
 Unyana wami he ujongile  
 MaRadebe susa ezo spex  
 Uze emshadweni  
 Ngiyashadisa namhlanje  
 Bebesithi unyana wami lixhoki  
 Bebesithi angeke ashade

Is getting married today  
 Open the path/ way, you Manyawuza  
 I never knew I was going to see my daughter in law  
 However, my son was looking  
 MaRadebe take out those spectacles  
 Come to the wedding  
 There is a wedding today  
 They were saying my son is a liar  
 They were saying He would never get married

Lucky's family begins in a challenging situation, struggling to meet their basic needs, including balanced meals. However, Lucky's questionable choices lead to illicit rewards, ultimately benefiting his family. The musical persona expresses a level of enthusiasm that contrasts with Lucky's mother, who embodies a staunch Christian view. She would not approve of her son's behaviour or find joy in his windfall, making the persona a contrasting voice to hers.

The persona uses a wedding allegory to compare the money gained from carjacking to a bride, proudly showcasing this unexpected success to a list of named doubters and naysayers who represent a community sceptical of Lucky's achievements. Through the persona, we see a proud mother celebrating her son's coming of age. Despite being dismissed by society, Lucky manages to navigate an important rite of passage: marriage. In the African context, marriage is not just a life milestone but also a sign of success, often involving significant commitments such as dowry ceremonies and other responsibilities.

Thus, the persona plays a crucial role in celebrating Lucky's journey and the paths taken by the other characters. This supporting character adds depth to the narrative of *Jerusalema*, which is woven from themes in "Vulindlela" by Brenda Fassie.

The musical characters depicted in the song also provide a glimpse into gender politics and relations, as the persona reminds Mangobese, thus,

#### LYRICS

Kodwa wena Mangobese  
 Hee unomona ngoba awuna nyana  
 Unentombi zondwa

#### TRANSLATION

But you Mangobese  
 Hee you are jealous because you don't have a son  
 You have daughters only

The gendered portrayal of these characters offers an opportunity for the film to explore gender relations and political issues. However, this thematic exploration primarily unfolds outside the immediate audio-visual elements of the diegetic narrative, further highlighting the presence of the characters and their roles in advancing the narrative and thematic dimension.

*Le Bucheron* is a song by Franklin Boukaka, with arrangements by Manu Dibango, featured in the album *Franklin Boukaka à Paris*.<sup>12</sup> This musical piece is deployed in *Viva Riva* as the film fades out and the credits roll after a narrative of bloodshed and devastation. The visuals and sounds in the film illustrate the prevailing circumstances and existential milieu in the DRC, encompassing the murk, rundown infrastructure, disintegration of law and order, and a disenfranchised populace.

*Le Bucheron* introduces an eponymous musical character: a lumberjack/woodcutter. The Congo Basin in Central Africa, characterised by its tropical forests and rivers, features professions such as lumberjacking, which are recognised as typical, blue-collar occupations. In addition to lumberjacks, comparable vocations include Congolese miners, factory workers engaged in smelting operations, transport personnel, and individuals occupying low-tier positions in both the government and private sectors. These labourers comprise the foundational core of the working class and represent a significant portion of the tax base in the Congo and, by extension, other African nations. Consequently, they represent a considerable segment of the population and contribute significantly to the Gross Domestic Product

<sup>12</sup> Gary Stewart, *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos* (Verso, 2003).

(GDP) of their respective countries. However, jobs and vocations are high-energy sapping with low reward. The persona sings of this, thus,

<b>LYRICS</b>	<b>TRANSLATION</b>
<i>Kokata koni pasi</i>	Cutting firewood is hard work
<i>Soki na kati koteka pasi</i>	To sell this wood is another
<i>Na pasi oyo ya boye</i>	With this lot of misfortunes
<i>Ngai na bana mawa, Nakoka te</i>	and children I'm far from getting out

This reveals a protagonist character not visually represented in *Viva Riva*, but to whom many of the deplorable situations, transport issues, housing, and security issues can be related. The woodcutter's children, whom the persona sings of, are supporting characters who bear the brunt of his financial vagaries. This adds to the film a host of characters – the lumberjack and his family – who are ordinary Africans trying to eke out a normal life amid the chaos, violence, corruption, and moral turpitude rampant in their cities, towns and villages across Africa. The woodcutter's children can be related to Anto, a young boy of school-going age trapped in the fast-moving Kinshasa life. Bereft of any family benefits evident visually, Anto must learn to mingle freely with dangerous gangsters, prostitutes, and ordinary people, even in the twilight when he should be asleep after doing his homework. *Le Bucheron*, therefore, helps to build a perspective on Anto, albeit retroactively, as much more than an enterprising street boy through the associational relationship with the woodcutter's children.

This demographic also comprises a large critical mass of voters who actively engage in political discussions within their nations and democratically participate in shaping the political futures of their countries through their decisions and actions at the ballot box. It is this same critical mass, informed by its decisions, that influences the social and developmental trajectories of their countries. Additionally, they significantly contribute to the ranks of those who are civically aware and populate civil society and advocacy. Given that they are the engines of the economy, they also bear the consequences of adverse political and economic decisions made by the country's leadership. Therefore, their political voice is significant, encapsulating the representation of the population. Of this, the persona avers thus,

<b>LYRICS</b>	<b>TRANSLATION</b>
<i>Basusu oyo naponaka</i>	Some to whom I gave my voice
<i>Bawela bokonzi</i>	Have developed the greed
<i>Pe na ba-voitures</i>	Of power and fortune
<i>Bavoti tango ekomaka</i>	When the elections arrive
<i>Ngai nakomi moto</i>	I become important then
<i>Pona bango</i>	in front of them

The lumberjack, a character conspicuously absent from the film's initial narrative, ultimately emerges and finds his place towards the conclusion. As a politically aware activist, this character highlights the complexities of the Congo's political situation. The characters' actions and dialogues directly reflect the struggles and contradictions inherent in the nation's fight for self-determination. In the song lyrics, the persona asks,

<b>LYRICS</b>	<b>TRANSLATION</b>
<i>Nakomi tuna, Mondele akende</i>	I wonder, has the colonizer gone,
<i>Lipanda tozuwaka o ya nani e?</i>	For whom did we obtain independence?
<i>Africa e</i>	Oh Africa!

These lyrics encapsulate the larger theme of disillusionment and the ongoing struggle for true liberation, highlighting the lingering effects of colonialism and challenges faced in achieving genuine sovereignty. Therefore, the lumberjack's arc serves as a microcosm of the broader societal and political issues explored throughout the film. While the film largely focuses on stereotypical crime film tropes and characters, the lumberjack's presence serves to humanise the narrative, grounding the story in the realities and experiences of ordinary Congolese people and, by extension, the broader experiences of African

civilians affected by similar conflicts. Therefore, the lumberjack's journey provides a crucial counterpoint to the film's more conventional elements, offering a more nuanced and relatable perspective on the political and social dynamics at play. *Le Bucheron*, therefore, introduces characters who add an extra layer to the diegetic *Viva Riva* characters, who seem either nonchalant or complicit in the deplorable Congo situation.

*Take Me Home Taxi Man* by the Soul Brothers is deployed in the bustling scene of taxis hauling passengers and goods outside the Johannesburg Central Business District. Among the hundreds of taxis is one driven by Lucky, with Zakes as the conductor. The repetitive song lyrics “take me home, taxi man, this is my time to go” personify a regular South African engaged in the mundane routine of going back home after a backbreaking day of work. Like the lumberjack incorporated into the *Viva Riva* narrative, this ordinary South African could be a trader, subordinate in a corporation, low-level cadre in a mine, mine worker, or church minister, who must contend with the hectic public transport, an investment that is a source of rampant conflict in South Africa. The soulful rhythm and melody of the song contrast with the reality of the violence in the South African taxi business, which is revealed when Lucky Kunene is attacked by a rival taxi crew in Hillbrow. In the song, the Soul Brothers conjure up the character of the largely patient and calm working class in South Africa, whose quest for an idyllic trip home after a day of honest work is sometimes interrupted by the violence of their means of transport.

The persona, therefore, is a musical character that is akin to the fringe characters visually represented in the film; within the bustling streets, taxi ranks, among the school-going children, the taxi and train passengers going about their business, but are always at the crossfire of the criminal and law enforcement protagonists. The musical character, therefore, represents a non-diegetic deuteragonist to whom the Soul Brothers’ music adds to the *Jerusalema* narrative.

Franco Luambo’s Mario is another instance of musical character development within film music lyrics. The song tells the story of a young man, Mario, who, despite having received a formal education, chooses to live off the wealth of an older woman, abandoning the notions of personal responsibility and masculinity. In the cinematic *Viva Riva* context, Mario operates as a non-diegetic character. The lyrics introduce him thus,

LYRICS	TRANSLATION
<i>Oh mario</i>	Oh Mario
<i>Luka ata mwasi yo moko obala</i>	Oh Mario, look for one woman to marry
<i>Mario mosala kolinga ba mama mobokoli-</i>	You tend to go after older women
<i>Basuka yo te?</i>	Will you ever get enough of them?

Although Mario, the musical character, does not visually appear in *Viva Riva*, the logic of his arc parallels the character of Riva, the main protagonist. The two characters share a journey of an amoral life characterized by sexual debauchery and endless alcohol. The persona expresses dismay and fatigue at Mario’s behaviour, thus,

LYRICS	TRANSLATION
<i>Lelo makambo lobi makambo nalembi-</i>	Today problems, tomorrow problems I’m tired
<i>Lelo bitumba lobi koswana nabaye</i>	Today fighting, tomorrow quarrelling, I hate it
<i>Naboyi kobebisa nzoto na manzaka nalembi</i>	I don’t want you destroying my body with your nails anymore
<i>eh</i>	
<i>Mario nalembi e e</i>	Mario I am tired
<i>Mario nabaye e e</i>	Mario, I don’t like it
<i>Naboyi kobebisa nzoto na manzaka nalembi</i>	I don’t want you destroying my body with your nails anymore
<i>eh</i>	
<i>Mario nalembi e e</i>	Mario I am tired
<i>Mario nabaye e e</i>	Mario, I don’t like it

The persona, a voice of reason in Mario’s life – a wife, lover, sibling, or parent – plays the role of a moral witness or cultural chorus, providing commentary and caution to characters like Mario and Riva, whose ambitions are not underwritten by ethics. The persona’s words critique Mario’s behaviour and the broader social dynamics, especially in urban African settings, where the promises of contemporariness are

subject to the contextual milieu, including ailments like AIDS. Thus, Franco's *Mario* transcends its musical frame, offering a narrative structure and ethical lens that could easily deepen the meanings of contemporary African cinema.

*Jerusalema*, a musical piece by Alan Lazar, introduces the anthropomorphic city of New Jerusalem as a character. Supported by numerous other versions of the Jerusalema-themed music in the film, including a Kwaito version by Mandoza and a hymn version by Lusanda Spiritual Choir, the track bestows emotional and social human traits to the city. The song begins with a visceral description of *Jerusalema*, expressing deep-seated affection, pride, and belonging. The lyrics open the narrative, thus,

LYRICS	TRANSLATION
<i>Imfudumalo yankho</i>	Your warmth
<i>Ithumela imiyalezo yeqiniso</i>	Sends messages of truth
<i>Uma ngicabanga ngawe ngiyaphumula</i>	When I think of you, I rest
<i>Uyohlala ukhululekile</i>	You will forever be free
<i>Jerusalema siyazithoba</i>	Jerusalema, we humble ourselves
<i>Khula njalo udlondlobale</i>	Grow and thrive
<i>Uyibekile induku ebandla</i>	You have accomplished
<i>Halala siyakudumisa</i>	Salute, we honour you

The persona in the musical refrain describes the Jerusalema character as a mother, nurturer, and mentor, creating an image of an all-encompassing, powerful character upon whom the other characters rely. However, in the same breath, Jerusalema is infantilized as childlike, with a longing for love and a need for growth and freedom.

LYRICS	TRANSLATION
<i>Jerusalema entsha</i>	New Jerusalem
<i>Unjengomtwana odinga uthando</i>	You are like a child who longs for love
<i>Ukunakekela kwakho kujabulisa abantwana bakho</i>	Your caring brings joy to your children
<i>Ziqhenye ukhule njalo</i>	Be proud and always grow
<i>Khumbula abantwana bakho Ngobubele nagothando</i>	Remember your children with empathy and love

In the two descriptions, Jerusalema emerges as a character embodying the intricate balance between maternal power and responsibility, intertwined with the fragility and innocence of a child. This portrayal resonates deeply with the societal characterizations prevalent in South Africa, a nation that has struggled to overcome the shackles of apartheid in its quest for freedom. Jerusalema, as a character, assumes a crucial deuteragonist role, catalyzing the actions of other characters within the narrative. Similar to the resilient populace navigating the streets and public transport systems, Jerusalema stands as a pivotal figure whose presence shapes the overarching conflict in the film. The persona captures the spirit of this trait, thus,

LYRICS	TRANSLATION
<i>Izidubedube nezihibe</i>	Chaos and riots
<i>zingaphazamisi imphumelelo yokho</i>	Should not obstruct your success
<i>Ziphamandla ungesabi</i>	Give yourself power and don't be afraid
<i>Nqoba njalo Jerusalema</i>	Be victorious always Jerusalem
<i>Kancane kancane kuzolunga</i>	Bit by bit everything will be fine
<i>Ngoba uheha izizwe ngezizwe</i>	Because you attract nations and tribes
<i>Umhlaba wonke uyahlokoma</i>	The whole world is rejoicing
<i>Uyanakekela unozwelo</i>	You are caring and sympathetic

Music serves as a potent instrument in elevating Jerusalema and, by extension, the broader South African and African societies to the forefront of the cinematic discourse. This musical accompaniment enriches the film's messaging, underscoring the profound repercussions of individual irresponsibility on the collective societal fabric. Through the character of Jerusalema and the evocative soundscape, the film delves deeply into the complexities of human interaction and societal dynamics, presenting a poignant reflection on the enduring legacy of historical injustices and the resilience of the human spirit. Consequently, the music brings Jerusalema and the South African and African societies to the fore in the cinematic exploration, further amplifying the film's messaging as one deeply rooted in the consequences of individual irresponsibility for the larger society.

This character is enhanced by the inclusion of *Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika*, the South African national anthem, which is prominently featured in the opening montage. This montage portrays the pivotal events of 1994, signifying the historical transition from apartheid rule to a democratically elected African government in South Africa. The visual narrative is complemented by a voiceover from the character Lucky Kunene, articulating the sentiment of the era: "Freedom. The new South Africa. A new dawn. A new day. A clean slate. A new page..." These words, in conjunction with the powerful imagery and stirring melody of *Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika*, effectively construct a character that embodies a nation filled with hope. This character honours its heroes and aspires toward a future characterised by reconciliation and prosperity, actively endeavouring to transcend the painful legacy of oppression. This notion is aptly linked to the utopian character further advanced by the music of Jerusalema by Lazar, as discussed previously.

The foregoing reveals musical characters forged within the non-diegetic space of *Viva Riva* and *Jerusalema* at the lyrical and symbolic levels. Music creates and develops characters by directly naming them, providing socio-emotional descriptions, associating them with diegetic characters, and using leitmotifs that relate to characters manifesting in the visual narrative. The next section reviews musicians as implicit musical characters.

### **The Musician as Implicit Character**

Music functions as an invisible narrative force in cinema, with musicians serving as implicit characters whose identities, beliefs, and artistic expressions shape storytelling without appearing on screen. This complex relationship between the musician and the narrative creates a unique form of characterisation that operates beyond traditional visual representation. When a musician's compositions feature in films, they often embody non-diegetic musical personas that significantly influence the emotional landscape and thematic development of the film. A carefully selected musical repertoire becomes an extension of the film's narrative voice, guiding audience interpretation and emotional response with deliberate precision.

This implicit characterization enables filmmakers to layer their works with additional meaning by incorporating artists whose public identities, political stances, or cultural significance resonate with the film's themes. Through this technique, directors can achieve deeper socio-political commentary without resorting to explicit exposition, thereby creating a more nuanced and immersive viewing experience.<sup>13</sup> The musician's invisible presence serves multiple narrative functions simultaneously: establishing atmosphere, reinforcing character development, signalling emotional shifts, and providing historical or cultural context. These musical choices often operate on both conscious and subconscious levels for viewers, creating connections that might not be immediately apparent but nonetheless enrich the overall experience. In this way, the musician becomes an essential collaborator in storytelling, their artistic voice intertwined with the director's vision to create a cohesive and multidimensional narrative. This synthesis elevates film music from mere accompaniment to a vital, active character integral to the narrative, thereby expanding the cinematic expression beyond the visual.

Franklin Boukaka, like the lumberjack in his song *Le Bucheron*, was a politically active Congolese citizen. Spanning both Congos, Boukaka was a successful musician with many albums to his name. *Pont Sur le Congo*, *Les Immortelles*, and *Le Bucheron* are among his most popular songs that reflect his political views. Frustrated by Congo's misrule, Boukaka became increasingly involved in politics, eventually joining the 1972 rebellion and being extrajudicially executed for his role in an attempted coup.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Chenyue Zhuang, "The Roles of Music in Films," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 23 (December 13, 2023): 596–600, <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v23i.13123>.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart, *Rumba on the River: A History of the Popular Music of the Two Congos*.

Boukaka's conviction manifests poignantly in his thematic questions in *Le Bucheron*. "Aye, Africa, where is your independence? Aye, Africa, where is your liberty?" These piercing questions are not only inspired by the destructive heritage of European colonisation but by an observation of what Africa, in the hands of greedy post-independence leaders, turned out to be. Characterised by greed, corruption, political assassinations and clamping of citizens' rights, the independent African countries of Boukaka were bound in heavier and tighter shackles than before. Boukaka's is a lucid addition to the *Viva Riva* story that mirrors Fela Kuti, another musician, who incorporated his political beliefs into his music and Folarin Falz Folana, whose music features in *Oloture*, a Nigerian film directed by Kenneth Gyang.

Fela Kuti, a Nigerian multi-instrumentalist and bandleader, used his music as a powerful tool to challenge oppressive structures and galvanise social movements. His lyrics often addressed issues such as governmental corruption, human rights abuses, and social injustices. Kuti's music was not merely entertainment; it was a form of resistance against the military regime. His establishment of the Kalakuta Republic, a communal compound that served as a sanctuary for marginalised individuals and a hub for his revolutionary activities, exemplified his commitment to challenging the status quo. Kuti's activism came at a high personal cost. His mother's brutalisation and subsequent death at the hands of the military, his multiple incarcerations, and the torture he endured are testaments to the high price he paid for his resistance to the regime. Despite these adversities, Kuti remained steadfast and used his music to challenge the Nigerian government.<sup>15</sup> His banned music and portrayal of socio-political struggles through art were instrumental in fostering a sense of solidarity and resilience among his listeners. Folarin Folana's activism through music reflects the enduring influence of Fela Kuti. His songs deployed in *Oloture*, including *E No Finish* and *Follow Follow*, engage in the musical character terrain through the reflection of his and Fela Kuti's brazen critiques of governmental policies, social inequalities, and human rights abuses.

The implicit characterisation of the activist personas of Kuti and Folana mirrors the protagonist in *Oloture*. Her struggle against the oppressive trafficking ring and quest for justice are reminiscent of Kuti's battles against governmental corruption and human rights abuses. The film's narrative synergy, which blends musical activism with cinematic storytelling, creates a compelling and impactful portrayal of socio-political struggles. The enduring legacy of musicians as implicit characters in African cinema is highlighted by the intertwining of music and film to address socio-political issues and shape cinematic narratives.

In Djo Munga's *Viva Riva*, the soundtrack, shaped by an eclectic assembly of Congolese musical figures, serves not merely as atmospheric accompaniment but as a collection of narrating entities. In addition to Franklin Boukaka, Franco Luambo Makiadi and TPOK Jazz, Flamme Kapaya, CongopunQ, Papy Mbavu, and Jean Koubald Kalala contribute distinct historical sensibilities and ideological significance that refract the film's exploration of morality, corruption, and post-conflict identity in the DRC.<sup>16</sup> Franco Luambo Makiadi's presence predominates the narrative, akin to a cultural patriarch, with his soukous compositions delineating the aesthetic and political soundscape of post-independence Zaire. His songs, rich in parables and social critique, operate as sonic mirrors that reflect the ethical ambiguities associated with Riva's underworld activities.<sup>17</sup> Franco serves as the film's musical conscience—a spectral presence that is both nostalgic and admonitory, insinuating a lost moral order against which the contemporary hedonism of Kinshasa is juxtaposed. The film subtly mourns the loss of ethical and cultural coherence by contrasting the sophistication and emotional depth of Franco's rumba with the violence and opportunism that characterize Riva's environment. In this context, the song transcends mere aesthetic selection; it functions as a counterpoint, a recollection of a time when love, honour, and societal ideals were more firmly established.

The younger generation of musicians in *Viva Riva* articulates a distinctive relationship between tradition and modernity. Flamme Kapaya exemplifies musicians who both inherit and deconstruct the soukous tradition by fusing rock, jazz, and traditional Congolese rhythms, thereby reflecting the dynamic urban modernity of Kinshasa.<sup>18</sup> CongopunQ, a musical collective that explicitly experiments with genre to critique post-colonial stagnation, further elaborates on this generational tension. Their amalgamation of

<sup>15</sup> Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music!: Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Bob W White, "Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire," in *Rumba Rules* (Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Graeme Ewens, *Congo Colossus: The Life and Legacy of Franco & OK Jazz* (London: Buku Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Joe Trapido, *Breaking Rocks: Music, Ideology and Economic Collapse, from Paris to Kinshasa*, vol. 19 (Berghahn Books, 2016).

electronic beats, funk, and traditional instrumentation produces a confrontational soundscape that challenges the romanticization of Congolese musical heritage by foregrounding sonic fragmentation and genre collision.<sup>19</sup> As musical characters, these younger musicians destabilize inherited aesthetic norms, mapping the contradictions of a society where the globe intersects with local culture.

Mbavu enhances the musical characterization by introducing an ambivalent character enmeshed between tradition and innovation. Mbavu embodies the quotidian characters in Kinshasa, including those who populate street corners, marketplaces, and communal gatherings, representing the city's desires, disappointments, and evolutions. The musical character he projects anchors the narrative in the everyday experiences of those residing on the margins of illicit economies, providing emotional grounding for the film's exploration of structural violence. The musical ensemble in *Viva Riva* offers a lens through which Congolese cinema might be understood not just visually or textually but aurally, as a space where national histories and future imaginaries are contested through sound.<sup>20</sup> By recognizing musicians as implicit characters, we gain deeper insight into how *Viva Riva* negotiates the complex terrain of post-conflict Congolese identity, revealing music as a privileged site for articulating the contradictions, aspirations, and discontents that characterize contemporary urban African experience.

*Jerusalema* hinges on its musical landscape, which introduces significant implicit themes. South African musical icons, including Mandoza, the Soul Brothers, Mahlatini, Brenda Fassie, Hugh Masekela, the Lusanda Spiritual Choir, and score composer Alan Lazar, emerge as metaphorical characters whose artistic repertoires, socio-political engagements, and aesthetic legacies function as symbolic agents that shape and critique the depicted world.<sup>21</sup> Their collective presence forms what might be termed a sonic commentary on post-apartheid subjectivity, articulating tensions between traditional values and contemporary ambitions, moral accountability and economic survival, and communal ethics and individualist aspiration. This musical ensemble operates dialogically with the visual narrative, extending *Jerusalema's* examination of how historical inequities continue to shape present possibilities.

Mandoza and the Soul Brothers, prominent Kwaito and Mbaqanga musicians, establish contrasting narratives in the film's sonic architecture. Mandoza's seminal track, *Nkalakatha*, an emblem of Black South African empowerment that transcended racial and class boundaries, embodies the aspirational and defiant energies of the film's protagonist.<sup>22</sup> His musical character articulates a vernacular of survival and ambition, foregrounding a mode of self-fashioning that is both subversive and rooted in township socio-economic realities. In contrast, the Soul Brothers' mbaqanga sound, developed during the apartheid era, encapsulated resilience within Black working-class culture. Their presence signals a character rooted in cultural memory that anchors the narrative's present in past struggles, functioning as an intergenerational interlocutor recalling enduring values of solidarity and dignity amidst structural violence.<sup>23</sup> Mahlatini's musical persona, steeped in the aesthetics of migration and rural-urban displacement, serves as an elder whose presence implicitly critiques the amoral entrepreneurialism embodied by younger characters.<sup>24</sup> Together, these artists represent a spectrum of responses to apartheid's legacies, from accommodation and perseverance to reinvention and appropriation.

Brenda Fassie introduces markedly different energy to the film's sonic-textual discourse. Known for her confrontational style and unapologetic engagement with themes of sexuality, class, and political resistance, Fassie's music creates a character steeped in her sonic legacy that operates as a destabilizing force, questioning patriarchal norms, foregrounding female agency, and underscoring the affective costs of social mobility. The Lusanda Spiritual Choir contributes a sacred dimension to the musical discourse. Rooted in Xhosa gospel traditions, their repertoire invokes a spiritual worldview that contrasts with the secular materialism depicted in *Jerusalema*.<sup>25</sup> Functioning as a narrative counterpoint, their sonic presence introduces themes of redemption, community, ethics, and transcendence, symbolically representing

<sup>19</sup> Trapido, *Breaking Rocks: Music, Ideology and Economic Collapse, from Paris to Kinshasa*.

<sup>20</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> David Bellin Coplan and Percy G R Wright, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Longman London, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Gavin Steingo, "Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa," in *Kwaito's Promise* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Coplan and Wright, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*.

<sup>25</sup> David Dargie, "Xhosa Music: Its Techniques and Instruments, with a Collection of Songs," 1988.

cultural resilience rather than simply as a religious signifier. This spiritual register complicates the film's moral landscape, suggesting alternative value systems beyond material accumulation and individual advancement.

Together, these artists form a composite character within *Jerusalema's* narrative architecture: a choral presence articulating South Africa's complex cultural memory. Their contributions extend the film's diegetic boundaries, transforming its soundtrack into a dialogic site of historical reckoning and cultural affirmation. Music in *Jerusalema* functions as an independent character, complementing and actively shaping the film's critique of post-apartheid socio-economic conditions. This ensemble offers alternative moral perspectives that both reinforce and complicate the visual narrative's engagement with crime, aspiration, and structural violence. Through these musical figures, *Jerusalema* acknowledges historical continuities that persist despite political transformation, using sound to articulate what remains unspeakable or invisible within conventional cinematic representations. The soundtrack thus becomes a critical terrain where competing visions of South African modernity are negotiated, contested, and reimagined, revealing music's capacity to function as both witness and judge of the post-apartheid condition.

## CONCLUSION

Music in African cinema transcends traditional background scoring to become a powerful narrative tool. Acting as an autonomous agent, music introduces new dimensions to storytelling, embedding social memory and commentary into the film's fabric. In productions such as *Gangsters Paradise: Jerusalema* and *Viva Riva*, musical characters and musicians themselves function as implicit characters within the narrative, creating a presence that exists beyond the soundtrack. This musical characterisation occurs when musicians appear not only as providers of background accompaniment but also as embodied narrative elements that advance the story. Their presence, performance styles, and cultural signifiers contribute to the film's meaning, transforming them into narrative agents that interact with other elements of the cinematic experience.

The integration of music creates a unique synergy between sound and image, where musicians and their performances actively shape meaning, rather than merely accompanying it. Through this explicit and implicit characterization, music conveys cultural identity, resistance, and social critique, adding layers of understanding that visual elements alone cannot achieve. This approach transforms music from passive accompaniment to active storytelling, offering fresh insights into unfolding events and deepening thematic exploration.

For filmmakers, this presents an opportunity to collaborate with local musicians to create authentic and narrative-potent soundtracks rooted in contemporary and cultural contexts. For educators, it introduces the need to incorporate these insights into film studies and film scoring curricula. By recognizing music's characterization potential in African cinema, we preserve important cultural heritage while enriching the cinematic experience. The future of African filmmaking lies in this continued integration, celebrating music not merely as an embellishment but as an essential narrative voice.

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