

Scullery Department

1. Introduction

‘Scullery Department’ is a composition by Kippie Moeketsi, recorded by the Jazz Epistles on *Jazz Epistle: Verse 1* (Recorded in 1959, released 22 January 1960 by Continental records).

It is considered one of the earliest modern jazz recordings by an all-Black South African ensemble. The piece blends hard bop with local influences and functions simultaneously as a musical innovation and an act of political resistance.

2. Performing Line-up:

Kippie Moeketsi (1925 -1983) – Alto Saxophone
Hugh Masekela (1939 – 2018) – Trumpet
Jonas Gwangwa (1937 – 2021) – Trombone
Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) (1934 -)– Piano
Johnny Gertze (1937 – 1983) – Bass
Makaya Ntshoko (1939 – 2024) – Drums

3. Historical, Social and Political Background

The Jazz Epistles’ ‘Scullery Department’, composed by Kippie Moeketsi and recorded on 22 January 1960 for the group’s landmark album *Jazz Epistles, Verse 1*, stands as both a musical innovation, a uniquely significant artistic achievement, and an incisive critique of apartheid-era racial segregation. Widely regarded as the first modern jazz album by an all-black South African ensemble, *Verse 1* asserted the musicians’ artistic equality at a time when apartheid laws sought to restrict Black intellectual, cultural and social expression. The Jazz Epistles’ repertoire asserted many characteristics that apartheid cultural policy suppressed: non-tribalism, originality and urban sophistication.

The title ‘Scullery Department’ derives from the humiliating conditions under which black musicians were expected to work: although permitted to entertain elite white audiences, they were barred from eating in the venues’ public areas and relegated instead to the scullery or back kitchen. The piece recalls a notable incident in a Johannesburg nightclub where the Epistles insisted on being seated among the white patrons, successfully challenging a space structured by segregation. The track therefore functions as a subtle but potent act of cultural resistance, exposing the contradictions of a system that valued Black labour while denying Black humanity.

Musically, the work reflects the group’s immersion in global modern jazz, showing influences from figures such as Thelonious Monk. This stylistic fluency was itself political. By participating in a transnational Black modernity, the Jazz Epistles rejected apartheid’s stereotypes of African primitivism and asserted their place within a sophisticated international artistic community. As Abdullah Ibrahim later observed, their sound was as “fluent and edgy” as contemporary jazz produced in New York.

The broader context of 'Scullery Department' is the intensification of apartheid in the late 1950s, marked by legislation such as the Population Registration Act, Pass Laws, the Bantu Education Act and the Group Areas Act, all of which oppressed and marginalised black South Africans. Black people were regarded as inferior socially, academically and artistically. Urban black life was strictly regulated, policed and criminalised, and cultural activities faced constant restriction. Public performance spaces were segregated, and mixed audiences were illegal. Movement after dark became dangerous due to curfews. Jazz became a symbol of intellectual exchange and racial mixing, prompting suspicion from the apartheid state and driving some listening and performance practices underground.

The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, followed by further government repression, ultimately led to the fragmentation of the Jazz Epistles. Key members—including Moeketsi, Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa and Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim)—were forced into exile, curtailing the group's trajectory but ensuring its legacy as a foundational force in South African jazz and cultural resistance.

4. Musical Style and Influences

The musical language of hard bop emerged in the mid-1950s as a stylistic reaction to cool jazz. Where cool jazz tended toward a lighter, more restrained aesthetic, hard bop returned to the 'hotness' and emotional intensity of African American musical traditions, drawing strongly on Blues, Gospel and R&B roots. This resulted in a heavier, more 'earthy' feel, characterised by deep swing, funky grooves and a gospel-influenced rhythmic sensibility. Compared with bebop, hard bop generally adopted slightly slower tempos while retaining bebop's complex harmonic vocabulary and improvisational structures, creating a style that was simultaneously more danceable yet still intellectually demanding.

Harmonically, hard bop remained grounded in the bebop tradition, frequently employing ii–V–I progressions, bebop-derived chord substitutions and a sophisticated approach to tension and release. Its harmonic palette integrated both gospel-derived harmonic colours and the intricate bebop language, resulting in music that was 'grounded yet complex.' Standardised jazz forms such as AABA song form and the 12-bar blues appeared frequently, providing a familiar structural framework for melodic invention and improvisational interplay.

Melodically, hard bop favoured riff-based themes that were memorable, singable and often built from motivic development and cyclical phrasing. These riffs provided both recognisable melodic hooks and launching points for improvisation. Improvisational style remained firmly rooted in bebop, characterised by the use of altered scales, blues inflections, double-time lines and modes of the melodic minor, producing solos that were virtuosic yet soulful.

Instrumentation typically involved small combos—quintets or sextets—featuring a rhythm section alongside combinations of trumpet, saxophone and trombone. This setup allowed for both tight ensemble writing and open space for individual expression.

Within this established American tradition, the Jazz Epistles developed a sound that was simultaneously modern, sophisticated and deeply personal. Their style aligned with American bebop and hard bop in its harmonic language, rhythmic complexity and improvisational fluency, with likely influences including Thelonious Monk in Dollar Brand's playing and American bebop

pioneers, such as Charlie Parker. Yet they expanded this idiom by integrating distinctly South African musical elements, including rhythmic patterns, grooves and phrasing drawn from marabi, kwela and mbaqanga, while retaining the global modern jazz vocabulary. These stylistic choices were further shaped by the lived experiences of Black South Africans under apartheid, giving their music a cultural specificity that enriched rather than diminished its global modernity.

Hard bop's influence can be seen in the work of prominent musicians such as Horace Silver, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Sonny Rollins, Lee Morgan, Joe Henderson, Cannonball Adderley and Donald Byrd. Their contributions helped define the genre's signature combination of blues sensibility, harmonic sophistication and rhythmic drive. Across descriptions, hard bop is consistently depicted as embodying a deep sense of swing, funk-infused gospel influence and an 'earthy' musical weight. The genre's defining features—its reliance on standardised jazz forms, riff-based melodies, cyclical phrasing, small-ensemble formats and bebop-based improvisation—appear repeatedly in discussions of its style, highlighting its coherence as a distinct and influential subgenre of modern jazz.

5. Musical Characteristics

'Scullery Department' exhibits a set of musical characteristics rooted in modern jazz practice—particularly hard bop—while reflecting the rhythmic vitality, blues influence and ensemble interplay typical of the Jazz Epistles.

Form

The overall form of 'Scullery Department' is based on a standard AABA structure, consistent with the conventions of bebop and hard bop. This AABA format reinforces its grounding in standardised jazz practice. The use of this form supports the riff-based melody, clear phrasing, and cyclical structures that drive both the head and the improvisational sections.

Tonality and Key Centres

The piece is primarily centred in G minor, with the A' sections firmly rooted in this tonal area. A marked contrast appears in the B section, which shifts toward a major tonality, articulated through the use of G7. This tonal shift creates brightness and contrast within the otherwise minor-centred sound world of the piece. Although the overall harmony follows standard jazz conventions, this shift to a major sound in the B section adds expressive variety.

Harmony

Harmonically, the composition follows standardised jazz practice, making extensive use of ii–V–I relationships. In G minor, this appears as ii – V7 – i, a pattern that aligns the tune squarely with bebop and hard bop harmonic grammar. The B section features a sequential progression that moves down in whole tones, reinforcing contrast between the sections while maintaining structural coherence. The harmonic vocabulary therefore combines grounded minor-tonality progressions with movement characteristic of mid-century modern jazz.

Tempo and Meter

The piece is performed at a medium-fast tempo, specifically 176 bpm, which supports the swinging, forward-driving feel. The meter is 4/4, in keeping with hard bop's reliance on steady, propulsive quadruple time. The medium-fast pace creates room for expressive phrasing while still allowing for virtuosic improvisation.

Melody

The melody of 'Scullery Department' is riff-based, consistent with hard bop's emphasis on memorable, rhythmic melodic hooks. It is arpeggiated in both sections, giving the melodic line a strong harmonic profile. The melody is syncopated, foregrounding rhythmic tension and clearly reflecting jazz phrasing conventions. A blues influence is evident throughout, contributing to the earthy, soulful quality characteristic of the piece.

Improvisation

Improvisation is structured around each soloist taking two choruses. The first chorus tends to be more subdued, allowing the soloist to establish motivic ideas and a relaxed groove. In the second chorus, the energy increases, building into a hard-swinging intensity typical of hard bop.

Improvisations are:

- riff-based
- bluesy
- built on swinging eighth notes
- rich in motivic development
- heavily syncopated
- shaped through call and response

This approach reflects both bebop fluency and blues-derived expressiveness.

Rhythm and Feel

The rhythmic character of the piece is grounded in swing. The tune swings throughout, although the swing feel may initially be somewhat subdued before intensifying during solos. The overall rhythmic profile is heavy, earthy and bluesy, consistent with hard bop's emphasis on soulful rhythmic weight.

There is also a gospel-like approach to rhythm, contributing to its warm, pulsing groove. The rhythmic feel reflects the blend of bebop vocabulary with deeper African American musical roots.

Rhythm Section Function

The rhythm section is active in the bebop sense, providing continuous energy and interaction. The ensemble supplies a heavy sense of swing, with:

- a walking bass line
- modern voicings from the piano
- rhythmically active piano accompaniment
- a drummer who drops bombs (bebop-style accents) in the second chorus

During the second chorus of each solo, the rhythm section shifts into a more modern, assertive hard bop approach, intensifying the interaction and driving the music forward with greater force.

Overall Feel

The overall musical feel of ‘Scullery Department’ is swinging, heavy, earthy and bluesy. It combines the rhythmic propulsion and harmonic vocabulary of bebop and hard bop with the soulful qualities of blues and gospel. The balance between a subdued opening feel and a later, harder swing contributes to the expressive arc of the performance.

Comparison to Traditional South African Urban Music

‘Scullery Department’ differs from much other SA urban music in the following ways:

- no traditional African instruments
- harmony is standard jazz (not I–IV–V7 progressions or derivatives such as the marabi progression)
- harmony is not modal or drone-based
- no West African polyrhythmic layering
- not cyclic in traditional SA forms
- use of written notation and jazz improvisation techniques and scales.

By playing modern jazz, they rejected the stereotype of African primitivism, they claimed participation in a global black modernity, they asserted their intellectual and technical proficiency with American musicians

Mode or Scales for Jazz Improvisation	
Chord	Mode/Scale
G minor	G Aeolian (natural minor) G Dorian
Am ^{7b5}	A Locrian
D ^{7(b9)}	D Phrygian Dominant (5 th mode of the harmonic minor)
G ⁷	G Mixolydian
F ⁺	F whole tone F altered* dominant
F ⁷	F Mixolydian
F ⁺	Eb whole tone Eb altered dominant

* see notes on the altered scale

‘SCULLERY DEPARTMENT’ STRUCTURE AND ANALYSIS

		Listen to Track 1 (Full track)
INTRO	4 bars	Performed by piano and drums. Features rhythmic instability creating unease by using a hemiola/polyrhythmic feel: the rhythm section (piano and drums) plays in a 6/4 or 3/4 (3 beat feel), while the melody enters in 4/4 time, so the downbeat becomes displaced, creating a subtly shifting rhythmic tension and polyrhythmic interplay. This vamp/groove is used throughout the head, except in Section B.
HEAD		32-bar form (AABA) (8+8+8+8) Listen to Track 2
	A	Based on G Aeolian mode. Saxophone and trumpet play melody unison; trombone adds harmony in bars 5–6. Melody is triadic and repetitive The rhythm is swung. Intro vamp, played by the piano, continues as accompaniment. Section A ends with a perfect cadence. (A is repeated) Listen to Track 3
	B	Features altered chords (chromatic harmony), which create tension. Repetition and sequence feature prominently. The melody is played by the trumpet, accompanied by the rhythm section (drums and walking bass), and a two-note motive played by the saxophone which gets supported by the trombone later. Ends with an imperfect cadence. Listen to Track 4 (Vamp from introduction and section A is not heard in Section B)
	A	Same as A above

SOLOS		Each soloist performs two 32-bar choruses (64 bars). All solos start with a subdued rhythm section in the first chorus - 3/4 rhythm played by the drums, except the trumpet solo where the first chorus is unaccompanied. The second chorus of each solo has the rhythm section playing more actively, swinging harder with more bebop influence Solos are bluesy and characterised by riffs, motivic development, and syncopated, swinging eighths (quavers).
SOLOS	Alto saxophone Kippie Moeketsi	Chorus 1: Listen to Track 5 Accompanied by walking bass and ride cymbal; ends with piano tremolo. Quotes the first part of the melody and develops it using G-minor triad, blues scale, Aeolian mode. Listen to Track 6  Call-and-response in the B section (melodic idea answers a tone down). Bebop influences; rhythmic displacement; call-and-response in bars 19–22 (B section). Listen to Track 7  Piano tremolo Chorus 2: Listen to Track 8 Accompanied by piano and drums (dominated by ride cymbal); stronger virtuosic bebop language, swings hard with swung eighths. Listen to Track 9  Double-time, chromatic, angular lines reminiscent of Charlie Parker. Listen to Track 10 Piano tremolo

	Trumpet Hugh Masekela	Chorus 1: Listen to Track 11 Unaccompanied solo trumpet, ends with tremolo on the piano. Very bluesy and syncopated. 'B' section develops an idea through call-and-response and motivic development. Listen to Track 12 Piano tremolo Chorus 2: Listen to Track 13 Accompanied by rhythm section, piano (chords), drums (dominated by the ride cymbal); very bluesy and riff-based; motivic development; swinging 8ths. Listen to Track 14 Ends with piano tremolo.
	Trombone Jonas Gwangwa	Chorus 1: Listen to Track 15 Accompanied by drums and walking bass; ends with piano tremolo. Picks up last phrase from Hugh Masekela's solo. Listen to Track 16 Riff-based development. Listen to Track 17 Piano tremolo Chorus 2: Listen to Track 18 Accompanied by piano (chords), drums (dominated by the ride cymbal) and walking bass. Heavier swing feel, riff-based ideas. Listen to Track 19 Plays across the bar line (undermines/obscures first beat) Listen to Track 20 Develops riff. Listen to Track 21 No piano tremolo at the end
	Piano Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim)	Strong Thelonious Monk influence. The rhythm section plays in a swing/hard bop style, but the piano solo interacts by using syncopated accents, uneven phrase placement, rhythmic displacement and conversational call-and-response idea, interacting playfully with the drums and bass. Strong rhythmic independence between the hands. The left hand often plays light, syncopated comping patterns using extended jazz harmonies, creating space rather than driving heavy chords, allowing the right hand to phrase with freedom. Chorus 1: Walking bass and ride cymbal. Listen to Track 22 Develops riff, using more dissonant sounds (minor seconds, crushed tones, small cluster voicings) Listen to Track 23 Chorus 2: Walking bass and drums and ride cymbal. Ride cymbal pushes swing feel – changes feel on 8 bars of C – swing feel returns with last 8 bars. Listen to Track 24 There is no piano tremolo leading to the return of the head.

HEAD
returns

32 bars

Same AABA structure as before. [Listen to Track 25](#)

Sparse drum accompaniment.

LISTENING TIMELINE

Time	Event
00:00:00	Head
00:00:48	Sax solo 1st chorus
00:00:49	Quotes first part of melody and develops it
00:01:11	Bar 19 - 22 of B section - call and response
00:01:30	Second chorus
00:01:32	Sax solo 2nd chorus
00:01:46	Double timing
00:02:14	Trumpet solo 1st chorus
00:02:54	Trumpet solo 2nd chorus
00:03:30	Swinging 8ths
00:03:35	Trombone solo 1st chorus
00:03:38	Copies last phrase from Masekela
00:03:42	Riff-based development
00:04:15	Trombone solo 2 nd chorus
00:04:30	8ths swing harder
00:04:40	Plays across bar line
00:04:54	Develops riff
00:04:57	Piano solo 1st chorus
00:05:18	Dissonant sounds
00:05:38	Piano solo 1st chorus
00:06:16	Return of head
00:07:00	End

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