'O LD BLUE EYES' ventured into the heart of "darkest Africa" for his first professional appearance there in July, and if his image came out alive, it certainly didn't come out unsavaged.

Frank Sinatra sang from July 24 to August 2, in the Sun City Hotel Casino and Country Club in the so-called "Republic of Bophuthatswana," a "country" that the United Nations refuses to recognize or seat, and which has diplomatic relations with only one country, the one that surrounds its six fragmented pieces on all sides: South Africa.

"He is trying to pretend that he's going into a separate state, which it is not," said Victor Mashabela of the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC). "We don't recognize Bophuthatswana as a separate state from South Africa, and our policy is the same as if he had agreed to perform in South Africa. Therefore we will continue to protest against such behavior." The ANC, and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), are recognized as representatives of the black people of South Africa by the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations. They have observer status in both organizations.

When Lee Solters, Sinatra's press agent, announced the engagement, he echoed that country's apartheid logic, saying, "Sinatra's appearance at Sun City could strongly influence other entertainers who may be reluctant to perform there because they assume that Bophuthatswana is in South Africa."

The reaction was immediate. "What Sinatra has overlooked," said Harold Head, co-ordinator of PAC-initiated United Artists International Campaign for Human Decency in South Africa, "is that the majority of the people in South Africa, and the world at large, do not accept bantustans as a satisfactory political idea. In fact, his visit to Bophuthatswana will only serve to perpetuate the illusion of the bantustan as a legitimate nation-state."

Until then, Sinatra had not played to segregated audiences and had on occasion supported civil rights causes in America. Sinatra's lawyer and manager, Mickey Rudin, made sure to point out to a press conference of South African journalists that Sinatra "always rejected South African offers" to perform there, because, according to Solters, he didn't want to be associated with that country's racist apartheid policies. But by accepting the independence of the bantustan, which is the cornerstone of the whole South African apartheid policy, Sinatra finally agreed to perform in what is the most universally reviled racist state in the world.

Aside from South Africa, every other country, including the United States, officially views Bophuthatswana as a fictional creation of South Africa. It is one of the ten arbitrarily drawn bantustans—the result of colonial conquest and robbery of African land by the white minority—that make up 13 per cent of the most arid and resourceless land in South Africa. According to South Africa's apartheid ('separate development') policies, they are supposed to be the "homelands" of the black Africans, who make up over 80 per cent of the population. The South African government has been busily bulldozing dozens of black townships in the "white" areas to force Africans to "return" to "homelands" they have never even seen. There they are given homeland citizenship, thereby depriving them of citizenship and all political rights in the rest of South Africa. Most Africans contend that all of South Africa is their homeland, and that they have the right to share in the fabulous wealth that they have produced, but which only the whites enjoy. They point to the total domination of the bantustans by South Africa to disprove their "independence," and criticize them as nothing but forced labor reserves, opened or closed at will, to serve the labor needs of industry and farms in the "white" areas.

"Sinatra is playing there," said Solters, "because we were in the Republic of Bophuthatswana and were entirely satisfied with the condition of civil rights, integration and the like. It is not a question of defending Frank Sinatra going there, but an effort to make known to the world, especially those concerned with civil rights, the importance of the independence of Bophuthatswana. We think that the establishment of Bophuthatswana as an independent country is the right step for their future development."

Sinatra was unavailable for reply to the African organizations who objected to him going there, but Solters said, "I couldn't give a shit about the African organizations' opinions."

This raises the more general question of whether a performer should be concerned with the politics of a country when deciding whether to play there. Boxer Mike Weaver fought at Sun City Casino, and John Tate fought in Pretoria, decisions opposed by almost all South African blacks polled by The Post, South Africa's leading black-read newspaper. Black tennis star Arthur Ashe went there, but returned horrified at apartheid. He was said to be instrumental in convincing Wimbledon champ John McEnroe to turn down the reportedly largest tennis purse ever offered, to play Bjorn Borg at Sun City. Ray Charles ignored pleas by black South Africans to cancel his tour of South Africa, only to be met by organized boycotts by black groups that led to cancellations in Soweto and Welkom.

Actor Ben Vereen, and singer Gladys Knight had originally signed contracts to perform there, but cancelled out. Phyllis Hyman, currently playing in "Sophisticated Ladies," also turned down a South African offer on the grounds that morals were more important than money to her. On the other hand, the South African government doesn't welcome every American entertainer. In mid June a white student named Sammy Adelman was put under a five-year...
banning order (house arrest) after inviting Jane Fonda to speak at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg. Her visa application was rejected. And as Head pointed out, “If Gil Scott Heron or Bob Marley had gone to play in South Africa they probably would have been executed on the spot. What is it about Sinatra that made him different?”

Mashabela ventured an answer, saying, “Culture is very much a part of politics. And especially now that we have made the request internationally that people not participate, to participate is no longer a question of ‘art for art’s sake,’ or just ‘entertaining.’ But it actually takes a stand on whether or not to fight with the demands of the people of South Africa, or to side with the rulers of the fascist regime, and to weaken their isolation.”

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HIS QUESTION OF political choices by entertainers is not new. Maurice Chevalier created a storm when he collaborated in performing in Nazi-occupied France, which led to his post-war chagrinned apology.

The analogy to Nazi Germany is apt. South Africa is fighting an active war in its illegally held territory of Namibia; it has launched terror raids into neighboring states; it has been conducting a massive, repressive crackdown on black student, community and labor leaders in recent months. Nevertheless, Rudin stepped into Bophuthatswana and warily concluded, “I know that whatever the motives of South Africa were in establishing this country, the result is right.”

South Africa’s motives, which Solters said “should not be examined,” are clear. The architect of bantustanization, former South African Prime Minister, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, spoke of why blacks must be denied citizenship in “white” areas. He reasoned that the Africans should not be allowed to gaze out on the green pastures that will never be theirs.

Whites from around South Africa flocked to Sun City to fill the 60,000 seats over nine days to see Sinatra; the $55 and $85 tickets were snapped up by June 5. Thirty luxury coaches and five aircraft shuttled whites from Johannesburg daily. “Now, it is true,” said Head, “that unlike 87 per cent of the country, here the strict apartheid laws have been relaxed to the extent that blacks and whites are permitted so socialize in a common atmosphere. But it’s reminiscent of Batista’s Cuba, and this is where Sinatra is to appear.”

As a result blacks were legally allowed to see Sinatra sing “Strangers in the Night,” but it would have been stranger still if any of them did. Except for an extremely thin stratum of bantustan chief senators—turned-Presidents, Cabinet ministers and the like, virtually no one in Bophuthatswana could afford to pay the four weeks average wages for two of the cheapest $17 tickets which Sinatra started at. If a singer like Ray Charles, whose music is loved among black South Africans, was boycotted by blacks, even more so would be some foreign “Old Blue Eyes.”

“Who is he going to entertain there?” asked Mashabela. Imagine the scene: Sun City Hotel Casino and Country Club—gleaming, new, air-conditioned—sits in the middle of a vast, arid desert, from which Africans must eke a below-subsistence living. Whites from around South Africa pour in to the casino to escape the vaunted Dutch Reformed Church morality that makes gambling illegal in the rest of South Africa. This balkanized white pleasure spot self-consciously imitates the gaudiness and decadence of Las Vegas or Old Havana. Sinatra may not know that in the ten days he sang there, of the 628 African children born in the bantustan, 175 died at birth. A typical African woman, whose husband had been forced to work in a gold mine 500 miles away because of the 76 per cent unemployment rate in Bophuthatswana, may have risen slowly from weeding a little plot of land. But in the harsh, sparkling reflection of Sun City Casino, she sighed, “Ooh!...Frankie!”

“This call for a boycott,” Mashabela added, “is a demand that came from the people themselves. They don’t want anybody to come to perform and ‘entertain’ them in the midst of their oppression. The people don’t take too kindly to ‘entertaining’ apartheid, as it were.”

The boycott is intended to deny South Africa the international legitimacy it badly needs to maintain foreign economic aid to bolster apartheid in the face of rising black rebellion.

“We appeal to the international community,” said Mashabela, “to use every means at their disposal to isolate South Africa, using, for instance, sanctions. We view this as the last means of getting our freedom without as much bloodshed as if people continue to arm the fascist regime to the teeth.”

There has been a lot of unsubstantiated talk of very large under-the-table payoffs to such performers. Their presence appears important enough to South Africa to take such talk seriously. Sinatra certainly did not need under-the-table payments; according to the South African press, he expected to gross $1.79 million for the nine concerts. Even more important to the South Africans is their effort to garner international support for the foundation of apartheid—the “independence” of the bantustans.

“‘Sinatra is accepting the bantustan policy,’” said Mashabela. “He is saying that the black people of South Africa should be living in 13 per cent of the land!”

This is what made the decision of some of Sinatra’s stauere to play there so important. As Rudin pointed out, “My investigations have shown that there is no reason why Frank should not come here, and I hope it will encourage other performers to come. I’m sure it will.”

Asked about Sinatra’s appearance in South Africa, drummer Max Roach said, “My basic belief is that we shouldn’t have exchange of any kind with South Africa, especially in the entertainment field. That goes regardless of who it is, and that would rule out my being in favor of Sinatra going there. I say that, notwithstanding the fact that we have alot of house-cleaning to do ourselves, right here.”

“An artist like Sinatra, as a concerned citizen, should be concerned with everything,” Solters claimed. But, pleading ignorance of, and refusing to address, the overall apartheid policy of bantustanization, while focusing only on the narrower question of legal “integration” at Sun City, Solters made a rather curious distinction, saying, “This is not a political question, it’s a moral question.”

It seems that on either grounds, Sinatra is in trouble with the black South Africans. Asked why American entertainers should be concerned with the overall politics of South Africa, including the legitimacy of the bantustans, when considering performing there, Head said, “The politics of South Africa are as dangerous as the period in which Hitler sent millions of Jews to death in gas chambers and ovens. The situation is no different. South Africa is a concentration camp divided only between two classes. There is a guard class; these are the people who are allowed to vote. And then you find the inmates—that’s us! That is why they should be concerned.”