WHY SUPPORT THE CULTURAL BOYCOTT?

ACOA is often asked:

"What is the harm in entertainers going to South Africa?"

Even if they recognize the danger in sending guns and so support the arms embargo; even if they recognize the danger of providing computers to run the pass laws and so support trade sanctions, still many people ask: What harm can entertainers do? The singer, the dancer, the musician, the actor—"What harm comes of their traveling to South Africa?"

There are many ways of answering that. The simplest is to ask: entertaining who? Who has the money to pay? Often it is the white elite—so artists are providing amusement for the tiny group who seize everything for themselves. But as Hugh Masekela has said this afternoon, often it is black audiences who listen. So we need to go further to ask—What is entertainment?

Entertainment is closely linked to the art and culture of a people—and that is dynamically linked to the life of the people.

So in South Africa we really have two cultures—two arts: that of the brutal and frightened, lonely oppressor. And that of a people increasingly committed to a struggle for freedom.

Now maybe we could argue that people whose every experience makes them identify with that freedom struggle— the singers of Allende's Chile, the balladeers from Nicaragua and Grenada, the street theatre players of El Salvador—should go to South Africa.

You and I know very well that entertainers need visas. They are not smuggled through mail like banned books bringing powerful ideas in secret. Stand up and sing about freedom in South Africa and an artist will not last a minute. The South Africans go to jails, a foreigner would be bundled unceremoniously on the next plane out.

So the entertainers who go, and are allowed to come, carry ideas acceptable to the lawmakers. Romantic slush, or meaningless tempo is permitted, but nothing identifiable with the life of black people—the life of suffering and struggle.

In fact entertainers go to make money.
And white South Africa wants the entertainers:

a) Because it is bored, because the life of mind and spirit is deadened by the role of oppressor.
b) Because it hopes such bland food will pacify black audiences, keep the youth from thinking and acting.
c) Because it allows these international pariahs to feel "accepted" again--removing the stain of world isolation.

So foreign nonentities are feted in South Africa. People who couldn't get an audience of 10 up in Harlem are billed as "The greatest black American singer of the decade." Indeed ironically, it is black artists who are most desirable in White South Africa's eyes--who do the most for its morale, who most clearly grant them legitimacy.

All entertainers, but particularly black entertainers should recognize that there is nothing neutral about singing in Johannesburg or playing the saxophone in Sun City. It is a betrayal of the people's struggle to be free to go to South Africa.

It is an act equivalent to entertaining Hitler's SS troops, and no one who does that should be allowed to forget the meaning of the act.

You have heard very moving South African poetry here today. I am not a poet, but a line sticks in my mind: "Cry rage, freedom's child" says black South African poet James Mathews.

The entertainers who go have nothing to do with rage or with freedom.

They give their blessing to racism, murder, violence, even while they sing about love, and drugs, and the individual, seeking his or her own private solutions.

Whether they know it or not, they are freedom's enemies--and if they choose that side they should have to pay a high price for their choice. We must see to it that singing in South Africa means silence in America. If we don't we too will be guilty of supporting apartheid in South Africa.