

AQA AoS3: Paul Simon's *Graceland*

KS4

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Introduction

Fusion has played a huge part in the development of commercial pop music over the last 100 years or so. This fusion has mostly been with traditional or 'folk' music – simply put, music that belongs to the culture of a given country, people or area of the world. Whether it's American blues, Brazilian samba, Indonesian gamelan, Celtic jigs or Cuban son, recording artists from all corners of the popular music world have incorporated local sounds into their work.

Often, as in the case with Santana, whose album *Supernatural* is replaced by this new set work, those sounds are dear to their heart because they come from their homeland. But in other cases, such as that of Paul Simon and his album *Graceland*, the fusion is with not his own culture, but with that of an area far from his native United States.

In this resource we will look at the context and musical language of three songs from *Graceland*, which have been prescribed by AQA for study for the GCSE exam taken in 2022 and beyond as part of Area of Study 3: 'Graceland', 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes' and 'You Can Call Me Al'.

As an introduction to the whole project, this short video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=7G_HXlcbGpY) provides an excellent overview of the phenomenon that was *Graceland*.

Simon and Garfunkel

Paul Simon had his first chart success at the age of 15, with a song influenced by the Everly Brothers called 'Hey School Girl' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bsqt5jXFkYU), which he wrote and performed with school friend Art Garfunkel under the name Tom and Jerry. They made an album and appeared on TV, but subsequently went off to separate universities to continue their studies.

Sometime later, the two used their real names – Simon and Garfunkel – to release an album called *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.* It didn't do well, and Simon headed off to Europe to busk and play at local clubs, making a solo album in 1965 called *The Paul Simon Songbook*.

Meanwhile, a producer back in the US saw the potential in one of the songs from the failed album and reworked it, getting the record label to release it as a single. The song – 'The Sound of Silence' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ukmjBSQY-c) – became a No. 1 hit and launched the duo's career. Simon came back to New York and the two recorded their second album, *Sounds of Silence*, in 1966. Three more albums followed, culminating with *Bridge Over Troubled Water* in 1970, after which Simon and Garfunkel went their separate ways again, having achieved numerous hits, scored a blockbuster film (*The Graduate*) and won Grammy awards for 'Mrs Robinson' and 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'.

Listening activity: Simon and Garfunkel

Simon and Garfunkel were part of the 1960s **folk-rock** scene in the US, which also included greats such as Bob Dylan and the Byrds. While not similar in style to the music on *Graceland*, it would be good for students to listen to some of their music and get a broad understanding of another example of fusion with traditional music. Pick any two of the following tracks and ask them to find similarities – why do they think this music was dubbed 'folk-rock'?

- ▶ Simon and Garfunkel: 'The Sound of Silence' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAEppFUWlfc)
- ▶ Simon and Garfunkel: 'Mrs Robinson' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=9C1BCAgu2l8)
- ▶ Bob Dylan: 'Visions of Johanna' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uW9_2r3raHE)
- ▶ The Byrds: 'Mr Tambourine Man' (written by Bob Dylan) (www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7eJSDpMEI)

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Paul Simon goes solo

In the 1970s, both Simon and Garfunkel enjoyed successful solo careers. Simon's first album of the decade, called *Paul Simon*, included one of his biggest solo hits, 'Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cs6Uo97kNQ). This song sounded significantly different from his work with Garfunkel and attracted positive reviews. If you have time, it would be good to get students to think about what is different between this and, say, 'Mrs Robinson'.

Further hit singles followed throughout the 1970s, including 'Kodachrome', 'Loves Me Like a Rock', 'Still Crazy After All These Years' and '50 Ways To Leave Your Lover', the latter two coming from Simon's 1976 Grammy-winning album *Still Crazy After All These Years*. Again, it would be a good use of time to listen to one or two of these songs before tackling *Graceland*, to get further under the surface of Simon's solo style. In particular you can hear his multi-cultural musical influences, his folk-rock roots and his unique lyric style, part storytelling, part social commentary. It's also a very personal style, and many of his songs have been interpreted to be about aspects of Simon's private relationships.

Diversifying in the 1980s

Having appeared in Woody Allen's 1977 movie *Annie Hall*, Simon himself wrote and starred in a film called *One-Trick Pony* which resulted in another hit single 'Late in the Evening'. The film was not a success, however, and Simon turned his attention back to his duo days, reuniting with Art Garfunkel for a concert in Central Park in 1981 in front of a record crowd of half a million people. They planned to record new material but found that their artistic differences were too great, and they drifted apart again.

Simon was becoming interested at this time by music from other continents, particularly Africa and South America. With his 1983 album *Hearts and Bones* effectively a flop, and his marriage to *Star Wars* actress Carrie Fisher on the rocks, Simon was looking for a distraction. He had become fascinated with a recording he'd been given of South African street music called **mbaqanga**, and in 1985 travelled to Johannesburg to spend two weeks recording with South African musicians.

Mbaqanga: listening, performing and composing activities

Simon fell in love with this South African musical style, which developed in the 1960s and dominated local popular music, particularly in townships, during the 1960s and 70s. It is sometimes called 'township jive'.

Listen to the first couple of minutes of this example (www.youtube.com/watch?v=huRk7C3Nk1Q) and get your students to consider these questions:

- ▶ **Harmony:** how many chords can you hear in the repeating accompaniment? Are they major or minor chords?
- ▶ **Rhythm:** how many beats are there in a bar? What instrument is keeping a solid beat? What makes the rhythm interesting?
- ▶ **Instruments:** what are the different guitar parts doing? How would you describe the sax part?

Mbaqanga is characterised by the repetition of three or four primary chords, and short melodies (which usually last for one cycle of chords) that are repeated with small variations. There are improvised solos, and call-and-response parts. It has a strong 4/4 metre but is heavily syncopated, with phrases often finishing on the last quaver of the bar. The groove can be either straight or swung.

As a performing and composing activity, you could spend a lesson or two getting students to put together their own mbaqanga 'backing' (either live or with a DAW) over which they could improvise in a call-and-response style, following a plan something like this:

- 1 Create a steady four-in-a-bar pulse with light snare or shaker sound on the off beats.
- 2 Create a three- or four-chord repeating sequence using chords I, IV and V. Have at least one of the chord changes on an off-beat.
- 3 Create a bassline that follows the chords, with perhaps one or two extra passing notes or auxiliary notes (above or below the note that you're moving to).
- 4 Create a guitar (or keyboard) part that uses broken chords, so that it follows the harmony but sounds more melodic. Guitarists might want to work out a riff that follows the chord sequence. Keep it bright and simple!
- 5 Repeat this backing over and over, and improvise short, simple melodies using the major scale or pentatonic scale.

An introduction to *Graceland*

As an introduction to the cultural, musical, historical and political context of *Graceland*, show this short trailer for the film *Under African Skies* which documents the story of the album (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jw6eTs8mw7o).

In it you hear of the controversy surrounding Simon's visit to South Africa and his decision to record with South African musicians, at a time (in 1985) when there was a UN-led international boycott of South Africa because of apartheid. Simon attracted praise and criticism in equal measure for his decision to ignore the boycott, and he took great personal risks in deciding to go. For a time, he was even an assassination target for militant anti-apartheid groups in South Africa. As *Rolling Stone* magazine put it:

'To some he represented a rebellious hero taking a stand against bureaucracy... to others he was a naive fool who undermined the anti-apartheid cause. Still more felt he was a little more than a common thief.'

Of course, Simon was just the latest in a long line of white artists who had been using Black musical ingredients in their work, but the arguing still goes on as to whether the album *Graceland* gave a platform to Black musicians unintentionally muted by the sanctions, or whether it stole and made money from the cultural heritage of a divided country.

The South African policy of apartheid is worth looking at in more detail, in order to put *Graceland* into context and to understand the significance of the project. In this short clip, Simon reflects on the experience of the Black musicians on the album when they were recording in Johannesburg, and then later in New York (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAl3Wkz3aQQ).

How *Graceland* came to be

Paul Simon's career was at a bit of a low ebb when fellow musician Heidi Berg, once the leader of the house band for *Saturday Night Live*, approached him about producing her debut solo album. Berg was interested in mbaqanga and gave her would-be producer a cassette tape called *Accordion Jive Vol II*.

Simon became obsessed with the tape and asked his record label to track down the band on it – South African township group the Boyoyo Boys. Against a lot of people's advice, he decided to go to Johannesburg with his engineer, Roy Halee, to record with the musicians he had heard on the tape.

The Heidi Berg project was shelved, much to her disgust, and Simon booked out Ovation Studios in Johannesburg and invited many top local musicians and bands to join him for jam sessions. There was no pre-writing, and each group of musicians that attended were simply encouraged to improvise while Simon joined in with melodies and words. Ideas for songs were as much stumbled upon as crafted during these long jam sessions, which were all recorded.

By the end of the two weeks, a core group of South African musicians had been recruited to be the album's main band: Ray Phiri (guitar) and Isaac Mthsli (drums) from local band Stimela, Bakithi Kumalo (bass) from the band Tau ea Matsehka (which is responsible for the exciting grooves on 'The Boy in the Bubble') and, later and very significantly, Joseph Shabalala and his vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo

Ladysmith Black Mambazo was formed in 1960 to take part in contests of **isicathamiya** and **mbube**, traditional Zulu a cappella singing styles. Ladysmith is a town in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, where Shabalala was born, and mambazo is a Zulu word for 'axe', referring to the group's tendency to 'cut through' the opposition and win the contests. Soon, they were banned from entering but enjoyed success from touring and performing around the country. There is no doubt that their appearance on *Graceland* propelled them to international stardom.



The town of Ladysmith

Back in New York, Paul Simon worked on adding melodies and lyrics to the tracks recorded in Johannesburg. Then he and several of the South African musicians on the tracks reconvened in New York, along with other guest artists such as Linda Ronstadt, Los Lobos and the Everly Brothers. He ensured that the visiting South African musicians were extremely well-paid and looked after during the whole process, providing them with limousines and five-star accommodation.

Graceland was released in August 1986. It became Paul Simon's most successful album, selling around 16 million copies worldwide and winning the Grammy for album of the year in 1987. Five singles were released from the album (including the three we're studying) and the subsequent world tour, with many of the South African musicians who played on the album, was a huge success.

In the remainder of this resource, we'll study the three songs set by AQA: 'Graceland', 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes' and 'You Can Call Me Al'. I don't intend to go into the depth of analytical detail that can already be found in other resources, but after an overview of each song there's a listening activity and some performing or composing suggestions.

'Graceland'

The title song is about a road trip that Simon took down Route 61 to Memphis, where Elvis Presley's home, Graceland, is situated. He took the trip with Harper, his nine-year-old son from his marriage to Peggy Harper, to try to find solace after his break-up with Carrie Fisher.



Graceland, Elvis Presley's home in Memphis

Simon acknowledged that the talk of reconciliation and solace could also be seen in the context of South Africa at the time. As well as being Elvis Presley's home city, Memphis was where Martin Luther King was assassinated. The journey to Graceland is a metaphor for finding freedom from struggles with oppression and civil rights, comparing America in the 1950s and 1960s with 1980s South Africa.

Simon stated that the title originally came to him because the song sounds like a country music 'travelling' song, with its momentum coming from the drum and guitar patterns and its country style from the pedal steel guitar, played by Nigerian musician Demola Adepoju. His and Ray Phiri's guitar licks merge African and American traditional sounds beautifully. Simon also invited the idols from his teenage years, the Everly Brothers, to sing on the track. The single didn't chart well but won Simon his third record of the year Grammy in 1988.

The song's rhythmic country 'travelling' sound (likened by Simon to Johnny Cash's style) comes from three African players: drummer Isaac Mtshali (though some sources credit Vusi Khumalo as the drummer), guitarist Ray Phiri and the fretless bass of Baghiti Khumalo. Phiri strummed chords that created, for him, an American country sound, while the bass part doubled the vocals in the chorus – a feature common to mbaqanga music. There's also a one-bar syncopated, African-sounding riff in the chorus played by guitar and bass together:

The chords used in 'Graceland' are mostly primary chords in the key of E major, but when asked to improvise a part by Simon, Phiri also introduced the submediant chord of C sharp minor to bring a little more of the American country style into the song. The verse uses four chords – E, A, C#m and B – while in the chorus we hear just the tonic chord, E, with a hint of the modal sounding D chord and the subdominant A in the riff, as shown above.

Adepoju's pedal steel guitar plays falling broken chords, mostly in the verses, and the sound of Elvis's famed Sun Studios in Memphis is recreated by using slapback echo on the guitar and pedal steel parts. The Everly Brothers harmonise from the second chorus onwards, in the style of their trademark 1950s and 60s songs such as 'Cathy's Clown' and 'All I Have To Do Is Dream'.

Listening activity: 'Graceland'

Listen to the track 'Graceland' from the beginning to the end of the first chorus (1:28) and answer the following questions.

- ▶ Describe, using musical vocabulary, the part played by each of these instruments in the introduction, from the beginning until 0:40:
 - ▶ Drums and percussion:
 - ▶ Rhythm guitar:
 - ▶ Bass guitar:
 - ▶ Pedal steel guitar:

- ▶ Add the two missing chords to the first verse below:

_____ A

The Mississippi Delta was shining like a national guitar

_____ B

I am following the river down the highway through the cradle of the Civil War

- ▶ Which instrument follows the rhythm and melody of the vocal at the start of the chorus ('I'm going to Graceland, Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee')
- ▶ Describe the melody and word setting in the verse and chorus, using musical vocabulary where you can.

Further listening

- ▶ Compare 'Graceland' to the Everly Brothers' song 'When Will I Be Loved' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIoll5SexVo). What similarities in the use of vocals can you hear?
- ▶ Compare 'Graceland' to Johnny Cash's song 'Ring Of Fire' (www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrJx2aYF7VU). What similarities in its rhythm and guitar parts can you hear?

'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes'

Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo met at London's Abbey Road studios to record the song 'Homeless' for the album. This was a song written by Joseph Shabalala, based on a traditional Zulu wedding song. Simon added the English words.

Later that year, with the album still not released, Simon flew Ladysmith Black Mambazo to New York, along with core band members Ray Phiri, Bakithi Kumalo and Isaac Mtshali, to appear with him on *Saturday Night Live*. He said that the difference in culture between New York and Johannesburg was brought to stark reality for him when the musicians asked him how they could obtain a permit to visit Central Park. Back in South Africa, black people needed permits to visit many public spaces under apartheid rule.

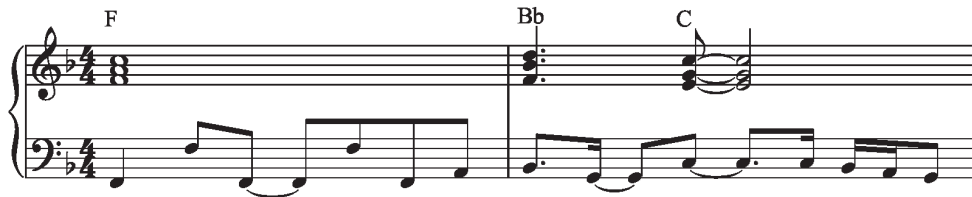
A delay to the release date for the album gave the musicians an opportunity to record another song while they were together in New York, and 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes' was the result. It opens with Ladysmith Black Mambazo singing in Zulu, a cappella, and Simon joining with English words. The two languages merge into one in the chorus:

Sing ta-na-na, ta-na-na-na

She got diamonds on the soles of her shoes.

As this section comes to a natural close, a bright melodic riff from Phiri's guitar sets up the main part of the song, with drums and percussion (provided by Mtshali and famous Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour) and Kumalo's fretless bass setting up the catchy, 'walking' rhythm.

The song's harmony is similar to other tracks on the album and South African township music in general, based on the three primary chords arranged in a repeating two-bar pattern like this:



Phiri's guitar adds decoration and Kumalo's bass part frequently becomes melodic and rhythmically complex – for example at the beginning of the chorus as Simon sings falsetto 'oohs'. The vocal lines are typical of Simon's writing style, free in rhythm with speech-like word-setting but always melodic and catchy.

The song tells the story of a rich girl (hence the 'diamonds' reference) who falls for a poor boy ('empty as a pocket') and discovers the emptiness in her own soul compared to the richness in his. Simon avoids making too many political statements, however, leaving that side to us ('And I say ooooh... as if everybody knows what I'm talking about').

The instrumental parts of the song are perhaps the most enthralling, with a rhythmic question-and-answer brass riff set against double-strums from the guitar and very complex, exciting bass and percussion patterns. At the end of the song, the 'ta-na-na' idea from the start returns and we hear the Mambazo singers again.

It is worth seeing a live performance of the song to understand its energy and rhythmic drive – this one from the *Graceland* tour in 1987 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fmf9ZJ_YnoA) shows the musicians at their best and also includes some fantastic choreography from Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who, prior to this song, had never performed with instrumental backing.

Performing and composing activity: 'Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes'

Listen to how Paul Simon uses the simple chord pattern written above as the basis for his vocal part, and then work in small groups to produce a short, simple song or instrumental piece based on a repeating pattern, maybe using the following steps:

- ▶ Choose a major key and two or three major chords that belong to the key.
- ▶ Establish a pulse, a tempo and a metre (eg 4/4 time, 110 bpm) and work out a simple rhythm for the chords.
- ▶ Add a bassline that plays mainly or exclusively the root notes of the chords, like the bassline in 'Diamonds'.
- ▶ Either record and loop this chord pattern, or have two or three members of the group play it – perhaps on bass, guitar/piano and drums/percussion.
- ▶ Either compose or improvise some short melodic ideas to go over this repeating pattern. These can either be sung (to pre-written words or nonsense syllables) or played on an instrument. This could be recorded or performed live to the class.

When composing or improvising a melody, keep it short and simple. The most effective melodies have short, repetitive phrases of equal length, are mainly stepwise and use a limited range of notes. It is often a good idea to work out the rhythm of the melody first, on a single note.

Sample Section B questions on *Graceland*

Section B of the paper, entitled **Contextual understanding**, asks more general questions about the Area of Study (students have to answer on AoS1, and then pick one other AoS to answer questions on).

Here are some ideas for questions, based on *Graceland*.

- 1 The songs on *Graceland* are influenced by the music of South Africa. Give **two** examples of South African musical influences on:
 - ▶ 'Diamond on the Soles of her Shoes'
 - ▶ 'You Can Call Me Al' [4]
- 2 All three prescribed tracks feature a horn section. State **two** features of texture typical of a horn section. [2]
- 3 State **three** characteristics of the guitar and/or bass playing in 'Graceland' (the song). [3]
- 4 Explain how Paul Simon's use of musical elements creates an appropriate sense of mood and style in 'Diamond on the Soles of her Shoes'. [8]