

De la Rey - Is it just a song?

Yolandi Groenewald

A call to arms for the ancestors, an anecdote about the conflict between Boere and blacks, tears from an Afrikaner intellectual and Afrikaner emigration all featured during the *Mail & Guardian's Critical Thinking Forum* this week in Johannesburg.

Prominent panelists, many of them artists themselves, debated whether Bok van Blerk's massive hit, *De la Rey*, was more than just a song. Former SAFM presenter John Perlman had his hands full during the debate calming tempers and keeping the discussion focused, as emotions sometimes threatened to boil over.

The panel included *Mail & Guardian* columnist John Matshikiza, North West University vice-chancellor Theuns Eloff, Afrikaans rocker Karen Zoid, playwright Mike van Graan and controversial Afrikaans philosopher Dan Roodt.

Roodt painted a bleak picture of the Afrikaner in South Africa today and described *De la Rey* as a sad song.

"It reflects the pessimism of a nation that is dying," he said, adding that the Afrikaner was being airbrushed from history. "The Afrikaner has never been so dominated in its history."

But Matshikiza maintained otherwise. Unlike Roodt he thinks the Afrikaners are still in a privileged position. He believes that *De la Rey* is far more than a song and called it "threatening".

"*De la Rey* was a hit due to the greater buying power of the Afrikaner," he said. "But it has become a call for a leader to lead them from their [perceived] desert of isolation into monochromatic glory. Rainbow nation *se ga!*"

The audience responded vociferously to Matshikiza's anecdote reflecting a friend's view of the world. He said his friend, when "well oiled", told him "the Boers were brought up to hate 'kaffirs' and 'kaffirs' to hate Boers". He said his friend believed because of this South Africa was "stuffed". "In *De la Rey* it is easy to substi-

tute the word 'kakkies' in the song by 'darkies', in a bar in Pofadder after a few drinks," he said.

Singer Zoid said she was ashamed of the song. She told how threatened her "multi-racial" band had felt at the Klein Karoo National Kunstefees when 5 000 young kids stood with their hands on their hearts and sang it like an anthem.

"These kids were only 16 years old," she said. "But they are copying their parents with old flags and taking up their baggage. I am ashamed, people".

Later she said that although she knew Van Blerk, she had never spoken to him and did not plan to do so. "*De la Rey* is scary. It is Nazi shit," she said. "I want to know where Bok is tonight".

While she believed that Van Blerk wrote the song for money, she also believed he should have been more responsible and anticipated the consequences.

Eloff said that in its simplest form the song was a country-rock-style historical ballad with tragic words, much like the Irish sad songs.

"But like those Irish sad songs, it has evoked some feeling among its audience," he said. "It has become a phenomenon."

He added that although he had cried the first time he heard the song, because "it touched him", he did not feel that he wanted to go and kill any Englishman.

"This is not a revolutionary song," he said, though he could understand some people's fears that it might be an anti-black song.

"There are fears that this could inspire your Boeremag types to take up the weapons, but it is a minuscule part of Afrikaners that is so radical. For most Afrikaners *De la Rey* is simply a beautiful, nostalgic song, not a revolutionary song," he said.

He believed the song would have its day and then pass. "Unlike other folk songs it will not be written into a FAK songbook. In the end it will cause more good than bad."

Like Eloff playwright Van Graan believed the song was written to be a hit and that Van Blerk had hit a financial jackpot because it



Above - Back Row: Trevor Ncube; Dr Theuns Eloff; John Perlman; Georg Knoke and Mike van Graan Front Row: John Matshikiza; Karen Zoid and Dan Roodt



resonated with such a large part of the Afrikaans audience.

He said when he had spoken to Afrikaners during the making of a documentary it had become clear that they felt marginalised. "*De la Rey* has become a plea for help from the ancestors, from a legend, Koos *de la Rey*. But we should not make too much of it, it is not political propaganda".

Some audience members, such as Afrikaans singer Coenie de Villiers, were unhappy with Roodt's negativism. Another, referring to Roodt's statement that most Afrikaners are contemplating emigration, because they see no future for them in South Africa, said he only wanted to leave the country because of Roodt.

De Villiers said *De la Rey* could have manifested itself as a soapie, a film, or even a book. "It could have been anything."

Another Afrikaans singer, Elzabe Zietsman, maintained that the song was written as a hit, not an anthem. Van Blerk and his co-author wrote it hoping it would make money for them.

"Believe me those two boys are not the biggest intellectuals. They shared a house with one of them. They chose *De la Rey* as a legend because it rhymed. That is all."



To listen to the full debate, visit www.mg.co.za/podcast

GNAWING OF TEETH AND WRINGING OF HANDS !!

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