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An allegiance to abusers

BY

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This weekend, Chris Brown will perform two sold-out concerts in South Africa. His relationship to the country reveals the twisted dynamic between a black American artist with a track record of violence and a country happy to receive him.

The last time Chris Brown performed in South Africa, the country was still in the throes of a second Jacob Zuma presidency. It was July 2016, and Zuma had recently survived an impeachment vote over his use of state funds to renovate his homestead in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal. The decision would enhance his reputation as the “Teflon President,” the so-called tactical mastermind who always appeared to be two steps ahead of the laws that he was accused of breaking. Back in 2006, Zuma was acquitted of rape charges in a widely publicized trial that saw his defenders, most notably the ANC Women’s League, wave placards with death threats at his accuser, Khwezi. As if this ominous victory in court wasn’t enough, Zuma secured the ANC presidential nomination a year later. On the other side of the Atlantic, Brown was dealing with his own self-inflicted woes. Following his assault of pop star Rihanna in February 2009, the singer was arrested for felony assault, jailed for breaching his probation, and accused of assault by his former manager Michael Guirguis. But that didn’t stop a festival in Durban from choosing Brown as their headliner that year. It would be his fourth trip to South Africa in less than a decade, cementing his relationship with a country willing to excuse his history of violence against women.

For a place with some of the highest rates of femicide and gender-based violence in the world, it is worth asking why Brown continues to be so popular in South Africa? When the R&B singer announced his December 14 concert at the FNB Stadium in Soweto, tickets sold out in less than

two hours, prompting the R&B singer to include a second show to meet the high demand. Built as one of the premier venues for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the FNB Stadium holds just over 94,000 seats—a testament to the devoted audience Brown has amassed over the years. Historically, South Africans have long been fond of black American R&B. It's been a staple on radio stations like Kaya FM and Metro FM, which have largely catered to black middle-class listeners. South Africa remains a popular touring destination for R&B artists—especially when they're well past their prime. In 2007, the public TV channel SABC 1 released *Chris Brown: Journey to South Africa*, a documentary that captured the singer spending time with children at an orphanage, reflecting on the ills of the apartheid regime at the Nelson Mandela National Museum, and even guest-starring on the hit soapie *Generations*, among other things. In one scene, Brown lavishes praise on South African music, stating that it is “more felt” and “from the heart” than American music.

It's hard to tell whether *Journey to South Africa* had any tangible impact on South African viewers. But in the eyes of his fans, Brown has been perceived as an early admirer of African music—mainly Afrobeats and later amapiano—long before it caught the attention of Western listeners outside diasporic communities. Back in 2012, Brown performed with Wizkid in Nigeria and Ghana, kickstarting a long-term collaboration between the two artists. A year later, he featured on Ayo Jay's song “Your Number” and later worked alongside veteran star Davido, and younger artists like Fireboy DML, Ayra Starr, Lojay, and Rema. In 2022, Brown released the song “Shooter,” which included vocals from Naledi Aphiwe, a teenage South African singer-songwriter. Her online videos came to the attention of Brown, who proceeded to showcase her work on his Instagram stories—interestingly, Aphiwe's song focuses on child sexual abuse at the hands of a parent. Brown has also been an enthusiastic participant in amapiano TikTok dances on his account, and at his shows, he is frequently praised for emulating the deceptively lackadaisical and fluid movements that characterize South African dancing.

All of this has lent Brown a degree of credibility among his South Africans despite the rivalrous (and often xenophobic) sentiments they may harbor towards Nigeria and the domination of Afrobeats. It's possible that Brown made a point of ingratiating himself with Afrobeats artists for the purpose of rejuvenating his career, that this move was part of a broader strategy to get ahead of what was the next hot trend in music. But his decade-plus interaction with the genre, plus his involvement in TikTok dances, has allowed him to position himself as an appreciator—rather than an appropriator—of African cultural production. Unlike British singer Jorja Smith, who once claimed to be bringing “piano to the world” with the release of her song “All of This” in 2021, Brown has been deliberate about playing a supporting role in these collaborations. As a result, he has been distinguished from his American peers. He's been perceived as someone who engages with African artists as equals, leveling the power dynamic that has allowed the Western music industry to pick and pillage sounds without proper attribution.

But not everyone has been keen to embrace Brown's return to the continent. In the wake of his announcement, Women for Change, a South African gender rights advocacy group, released a statement calling for the concerts to be scrapped, and petitioning the government to prevent Brown from performing in the country again. The backlash was swift and intense. A number of fans attacked Women for Change's Facebook page, accusing the group of being "run by foreigners" and "collaborating with kidnappers" to malign South African men. Some fans even threatened greater violence against women and children should the concerts be canceled. Even Brown couldn't resist adding to the furore, leaving the passive-aggressive comment "can't wait to come" in Women for Change's Instagram comments.

However, it was the celebrity gossip accounts on X that drove much of the intimidation and vitriol directed at the organization. Taking their cues from the agitators involved in the Bell Pottinger scandal, an incident that saw the Gupta family hire a British PR firm to heighten racial animosity on social media through bots, accounts like PSAFLIVE, Musa Khawula, and Chris Excel have led mass disinformation campaigns, leveraging the furtive tactics of alt-right reactionaries to create an antagonistic environment online. These accounts employ trending celebrity and influencer gossip as a vehicle to express misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic, and transphobic views. More often than not, black women are the primary victims within these artificial cultural wars. In the case of Brown, the account PSAFLIVE accused Women for Change of selective outrage, claiming that the organization was devoted to "tainting South African men." Khawula, who specializes in doxxing and cyberbullying, suggested that Sabrina Walter, the German-born founder of Women for Change, was laundering money from the nonprofit. Unfortunately, these actions derailed the momentum of the Women for Change petition, forcing them to prioritize the safety and security of their staff, who were subject to harassment.

The retaliation against Women for Change is also a consequence of the worldwide anti-feminist movement that has become more insidious and organized with the rise of fascism in the Global North. While South Africa has produced its own brand of anti-feminism among the evangelical right, ethnic chauvinists, race nationalists, and women politicians with vested interest in the ruling class, the proliferation of red-pill misogyny has introduced an edgy, new vocabulary for age-old bigotry. Not too long ago, incel perspectives were mostly held by young misanthropic white American men who sat on the periphery of the mainstream internet culture. Now they have permeated the world of health and fitness, career advice, celebrity gossip, music, political analysis, and dating advice aimed at men. Without fail, the impulse of these men is to victimize themselves and scapegoat the so-called modern-day woman. It is a development that isn't an exceptional form of patriarchy, but a sharper articulation of it.

This tide of global anti-feminism has managed to influence a generation of disenfranchised men across race, class, occupation, and geography. More specifically, Brown has been the recipient of

racialized victimhood bestowed upon powerful black men who find themselves on the wrong side of the law. It's not uncommon to hear his supporters claim that Brown has been disproportionately punished because he's a black man in America. Even Brown has deployed this cynical form of identity politics to dismiss allegations of assault. On the one hand, this impulse is a legacy of the black protectionist strategies used to shield black Americans accused of "criminal or unethical activity" during slavery, as scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown writes in her paper "Black Protectionism as a Civil Rights Strategy." While this approach may have been effective in confronting the racism of the US criminal justice system, it's proven to be counterproductive when it comes to holding to account celebrities like Brown, who have wielded centuries of racial oppression to provide a moral cover for their bad behavior.

On the other hand, the impulse is also a product of the warped perception that society has of perpetrators and survivors. Despite having a harrowing experience scrutinized by the world, courtesy of photos of her attack being leaked by the police, Rihanna has gone on to become a musical iconoclast, etching her place as one of the most influential pop stars of her generation. In many ways, she has enjoyed the kind of acclaim that was initially expected of Brown. It isn't so much that Brown has been severely punished for his actions, but that his most well-known survivor thrived in spite of his abuse. Not only does it turn the survivor-abuser dynamic on its head, but it breeds resentment among those accustomed to seeing black women suffer at the hands of such violence. As the recent documentary *Chris Brown: A History of Violence* illustrates, the assault didn't start and end with Rihanna. Throughout the duration of his career, Brown has been accused of beating, stalking, and harassing his ex-girlfriend Karrueche Tran, assaulting a woman in Las Vegas, and allegedly drugging and raping a woman on disgraced producer Diddy's yacht.

South Africa has undergone a number of changes since Brown's last visit in 2016. Zuma is no longer in power. The ANC has lost its parliamentary majority. The Fallist student protest movement propelled a younger generation of black feminist and queer activists to challenge mainstream discourse around gender and sexuality. And the tragic rape and murder of University of Cape Town student Uyinene Mrwetyana launched the #AmINext movement. In response to the outrage over Mrwetyana's death, President Cyril Ramaphosa pledged R1 billion (about \$56 million) to improve awareness around rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence cases. While there has been no real evidence of the impact of these measures, there was a perception that there had been, albeit minimally, a cultural shift. But the support for Brown reveals how much of that progress was an illusion that has been shattered by reactionary forces. If the South African government can't bring themselves to take a stand against someone like Brown, how can they be expected to take action against abusers who aren't as famous, wealthy, or influential? Earlier this year, the comedian Katt Williams went viral when he told podcaster Shannon Sharpe that he had "an unnatural allegiance to losers." Perhaps this is the best

encapsulation of South Africa's loyalty to Brown. We should know better, but that's never been a guarantee that we'd do better.

About the Author

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