

CLEGG

Millions of old computers are discarded in developing countries every year, along with mountains of other electronic waste. More is exported to them from developed countries. Most ends up being dumped in landfills, where it threatens to poison land and groundwater with lead and other heavy metals. It is one of the world's fastest growing, and most intractable, environmental problems.

But in South Africa, an unlikely businessman has begun to turn the toxic tide – Johnny Clegg, the rock star dubbed “White Zulu” both for his African music and for his remarkable history of ignoring racial barriers under the apartheid regime. He has started a company to recycle the waste, and to provide thousands of jobs. “This is the first business I’ve been in that’s directly linked to the well-being of the planet”, he says. “I think that’s a good thing.”

Born in Rochdale, in the North West of England, in 1953, he moved to Zimbabwe, his mother’s country, at the age of two. One of his earliest memories is of, when he was about five years old, being shown an example of the country’s wildlife by a young cattle herder. “He pointed his finger, and where he was pointing there was this herd of antelope – just standing there. I was completely amazed. It was like magic.”

At seven, his mother – a jazz singer – married a journalist from South Africa and they moved there. At 14 he started to learn to play the guitar, and took up with Charlie Moko, a Zulu flat cleaner and street musician, who played an Africanised version of the instrument, learning the fundamentals of Zulu music and traditional dancing from him. The two went together to perform in migrant workers hostel and rooftop shebeens and Clegg was often arrested for flouting the racial laws of the time.

“When I came to a fence, which apartheid was, my approach was to say: ‘Where are the

holes in the fence, so that I can get through?’”, he now recalls. “I got arrested, and I got into trouble, but everywhere I wanted to go, I went!”

Sipho Mchunu - a migrant worker and gardener, and another street musician - heard of his reputation and sought him out. The two teenagers started playing together, often enduring official harassment and racial abuse, and formed a group, called Juluka (“sweat” in Zulu) , in direct contravention of the regime’s Cultural Segregation laws.

Their music – blending English lyrics, Western melodies and Zulu musical structures - was censored and banned, but they toured the country, building up a following and recording a succession of hits. And when, in 1985, Mchunu left to go back to the farm where he was born, Clegg formed another crossover band, Savuku - which mixed African music, Celtic folk music, and international rock sounds - rapidly achieving intercontinental success,

Clegg’s latest departure began when he decided to replace his PC, and asked himself: “Where does your computer go to die?”. Learning that it would end up in landfill, he set up a waste recycling company, calling it “African Sky” after one of his hit songs.

He established his first plant near Johannesburg, where workers can strip down a computer into recyclable parts in just six minutes: only one per cent of the waste has to be thrown out. And he is now planning a \$10 million state-of-the-art facility near Cape Town that will take in and recycle electronic waste from Europe and the United States, giving work to 17,000 people.

“Electronic components are full of toxins, and most electronic junk ends up choking landfills as these poisons seep into the ground”, he says. “But now people will not need to throw their old computers into them.”

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JOHNNIE

