

Paul Brickhill, A life lived forever

When the news started filtering through on the morning of 3 October 2014 that Zimbabwean arts giant [Paul Brickhill](#) had passed away, though expected, it was a moment a slough of despond hung over the arts sector ominously.

Since independence Paul Brickhill in various capacities had been a significant part of the narrative of how the arts and indeed the free space conversation was shaped in Harare.

To understand him, one would need to go to his friends and family, the people with whom he broke bread and had chin wags poring over ideas that could open the minds of not only the present but the future.

Paul spent a life on the outside, always fighting for what was right and just. During the liberation struggle, even as a young boy he, according to his brother Jeremy, could not stomach the idea of black children being separated from white children. He then organised football matches where children could play together without the race barrier. This got him into trouble at school where he took on a vow of silence until the school relented.

Later he would leave the country and join the war of liberation serving as part of Zipra intelligence in Europe.

On his return in 1980, where he met Jackie Cahi at the airport, a friend who would later be part of a band with him and work closely with the [Book Cafe](#). Of the formation of the Solidarity Band Cahi said: *"Paul met the Bundu Boys in Highfield at Club Hideout like many bands. They weren't treated well and were abused by club owners who knew that the guys just wanted to play."*

And of the vision of the band? *"It was different for all of us I think. We wanted a band that said something – hence the name – Solidarity Band. But of course it was about the music, it was about playing to different audiences – and we played everywhere – all over the country from nightclubs in small towns, to backstreet hotels, to farm and mining compounds. We had a car – the Commer – and we would drive on weekends loaded up with gear on top to gigs in Mutare, Bulawayo, Kariba. It was also about getting to know each other. We were also just youngsters with big dreams – about music, togetherness – but Paul always had a bigger vision and another agenda. He was always a big dreamer – and that never changed"*

In the meanwhile Paul set up Grassroots Bookshop with contributions from war veterans who handed in some of their demobilisation money. Band equipment would also be sold to raise capital. Contacts were made with the big Soviet Distributor Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga the first consignment being received with great excitement. Premises were rented in New Africa House in the then Stanley Ave (now Jason Moyo Ave).

Roger Stringer used to buy books from them for the Gweru Teachers' College in the early 1980s as they stocked books that were not immediately available from other booksellers - books by people like Paulo Freire and Walter Rodney, the Heinemann African Writers Series, and "left wing" books published by Pluto Press, Zed, etc.

Stringer would later serve with Paul on the Zimbabwe Book Publishers' Association (ZBPA). They would also work on Paul's vision for the reform of the faltering Zimbabwe International Book Fair. The pair would also be among the 13 founding members of the African Publishing Network (APNET), a pan-African body that would work to promote the intra-Africa book trade (co-publishing agreements, distribution agreements, etc).

Paul never strayed far from the music and by the time he set up Book Cafe in 1997 he had already played many hours with Luck Street Blues, a band that included the legendary Dave Ndoro as well as a very young Tomas Brickhill.

In a way, according to Tomas, Book Cafe was created to find a venue for the band and also provide a space to compliment the shrinking Book business.

Cahi added to this: Paul came up with the Book Café concept – and the idea to open the space further and practically. Also he was a musician and an artist. By then Luck Street Blues was formed. Paul created spaces where he wanted to be – where there was music, food, conversation, people. And where he wanted to be, lots of others also wanted to be.

Incidentally the Book Cafe was started around the time when the political and economic upheaval began. As the tourists dried up because of the politics of the day and locals became less outgoing Paul started working at reinventing the Book Cafe and the opportunities it could provide developing products targeted specifically at development in partnership with the donor community. In amongst this he oversaw interesting configurations of artist expressions from cross-country collaborations and the creation of an [African Festivals Network](#). The network in particular would allow for the exploration of different artistic combinations that could tour the Fire Fest.

Jiggs from [Bushfire](#) said [African Synergy](#) (which he also founded) and [Pamberi Trust](#) were the two earliest partners of his festival before the creation of the network.

In all of this Paul stood for free speech defending the Book Cafe against insurmountable forces that tried to clamp down on expression. That came at great sacrifice but was testament to a man who left the privileges that Rhodesia could have provided to fight for the rights of the majority.

As for his legacy:

Jiggs: Pauls legacy as I see it has been about the emancipation of people, African people, who have told their stories through art.

Cahi: He was my friend. My good friend for over 30 years. I really expected us to grow old together.

Jiggs shares words from Paul, a letter he wrote, that summarise the greatness of the man: *Either everything is a miracle or nothing is”, to paraphrase Albert Einstein. I was always intrigued that a brilliant scientist would use that framework. The choice is ours. For me, everything that has taken place in my life appears to me as some kind of miracle, none more so than beloved Book Café, its artists and life!*

By Larry Kwirirayi