

The Expansion of Jazz through the Life of a South African Singer

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Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz. By Carol Ann Muller and Sathima Bea Benjamin. Duke University Press, 2011. 384 pp. \$25.95.

Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz presents the story of vocalist Sathima Bea Benjamin in the context of larger issues such as pre- and post-apartheid South Africa and the development of jazz both within America and beyond. Written by musicologist Carol Ann Muller (professor of music at the University of Pennsylvania), herself a South African, *Musical Echoes* (also the name of a Benjamin album) represents an impressive twenty years of personal interviews and collected research. Muller's previous offerings—*Focus: Music of South Africa* and *South African Music: A Century of Traditions and Transformation*—certainly give her the background appropriate to convey the story of the worthy but under-documented Benjamin. Muller describes early on that her goals for the book far surpass conventional biography: "The book is about individual and collective musical experiences channeled into and through real and imagined acoustical—mostly jazz—worlds from the middle years of the twentieth century to the present."¹ She assumes that American jazz musicians, critics, and scholars know little about jazz elsewhere and therefore Muller strives to provide a bridge to connect their knowledge with a broader community. So while attempting to effectively relate the story of a jazz singer's life and creative output, Muller also argues for the ethical imperative to promote greater inclusiveness and the adaptation of a world-wide narrative in the telling of jazz in the twenty-first century; lofty ambitions for which she is mostly successful.

Beatrice Benjamin, known at Beatty to friends and family, and with her named changed later to Sathima, was born 17 October 1936 in Johannesburg. Her father, Edward, was unmoved by her initial presence and, desiring a son rather than a daughter, refused to even look at her for two weeks. After an ugly divorce and child-snatching, Sathima's mother, Evelyn Henry was ordered by the court to relinquish parental rights of her children, leaving them in the

¹. Carol Ann Muller and Sathima Bea Benjamin, *Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), xvi.

custody of Edward and his girlfriend Hettie van Vuuren. This was a miserable situation for Sathima and her sister Joan who were seldom allowed to speak, had their hands and feet tied at night, and often faced beatings from their stepmother. Fortunately, when Sathima was nine years old, Child Welfare stepped in and moved the two children to the protection of their paternal grandmother in a middle-class but racially segregated suburb of Claremont in Cape Town. Calling her “Ma Benjamin,” the girls found their grandmother offered a much safer and nurturing environment.

It was while living with Ma Benjamin that Sathima began to absorb American culture and music through movies, leading her to early singing attempts. At the urging of Joan and friends, she began entering talent contests at the movie houses performing songs like “Mr. Wonderful” and “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” When she won, the prize was often free movie tickets and the cycle would continue.

It was also during Sathima’s years with Ma Benjamin that she became more aware of her racial status among other South Africans. With the passage of the Population Registration Act of 1950, Sathima, still a young girl, was asked to sign census forms stating that her family would be classified as “Cape Coloured.” Next, the Group Areas Act forced the removal of people living in Cape Town’s Coloured communities who were not of the assigned racial category for that location. Eventually, 150,000 people classified as Cape Coloured were forcibly relocated to Coloured townships. Other legislation that affected Sathima’s life was the Separate Amenities Act that mandated segregation in any public venue including jazz nightclubs. This meant the end of mixed-race music ensembles in which jazz musicians could exchange ideas and improve their craft. The Unlawful Organizations Act of 1960 forbade large interracial gatherings such as might occur at a jazz concert where diverse audiences are typical. The Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963 essentially ended any interracial jazz performances by forbidding more than one of apartheid’s racial groups from appearing at the same event. Sathima’s hopes that jazz would enable her to transcend racial categories were challenged at every turn by the ever-expanding policies of apartheid.

Somehow, South African jazz musicians still found ways to create their music and even laid the foundation for a regional subgenre known as “Cape jazz.” It was during her later teen years that Sathima moved away from the protection of Ma Benjamin to seek out this new music being played in Cape Town dance halls, hotels, churches, and nightclubs. Her development as a singer began taking shape during these years as she emulated saxophones heard in the Saturday social dance bands. Using playful alliteration, Muller describes how Sathima found herself “bending notes, expanding the pitch, playing in a

subtle but respectful way with timbre, texture, timing, text, and tune.”² Soon, Sathima found herself in the midst of a modern jazz movement in which she began to hear records owned by other musicians featuring the great artists of the time. This outside influence, along with reading Billie Holiday’s autobiography (before it was banned) planted the seeds from which Sathima began to imagine that jazz could allow her greater freedom in the world outside of Cape Town.

Sathima’s gradual immersion into the Cape Town jazz scene led her to meet pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (known as Dollar Brand at the time). The two first worked together performing Ellington’s “I Got It Bad” and a closeness between the two followed. Sathima soon abandoned her boyfriend at the time in order to be with Abdullah who not only promised her love but could provide her a musical partner. The two paid their stereotypical dues by living the life of starving artists, at times existing for weeks on only milk, liver, bologna, and bread.

By 1962, the apartheid regime restricted all interracial performances and the young couple decided that they had no choice but to leave South Africa for Europe in order to survive as musicians. Sathima described the difficulty of these days: “We went into the unknown. It was so shocking. It was so rough and cold. And we had to keep moving to survive. Zurich was our base, and we moved out from there.”³ In February 1963, their efforts resulted in a booking at the Club Africana on a night in which Ellington was performing nearby. The plucky Sathima sought out the jazz composer in his dressing room and the two struck up a conversation that led to him returning with her to the Africana. Abdullah’s trio played a few numbers and, after encouragement from Ellington, Sathima performed “I’m Glad There Is You.” The gesture was not just out of politeness. On this trip to Europe, Ellington was functioning as not only a bandleader but also an artist scout for Frank Sinatra’s Reprise record label. By the time Sathima and Abdullah saw Ellington the next day, he invited them to Paris where they would record only three days later.

Thirty tracks were recorded in Paris with a blend of Ellington’s musicians and the South Africans. Muller provides a transcription of some of the recording session and it is a fascinating glimpse of Ellington “the producer” as he consistently interrupts a take with suggestions, displeasure, or expectations. Sathima found herself challenged to sing material only shown to her twenty minutes before the session (Strayhorn’s “Your Love Has Faded” and Ellington’s “In My Solitude”) but was buoyed by Ellington joining her to play

² Muller and Benjamin 64–65.

³ Muller and Benjamin 128.

piano on some takes. She described what it was like that day: "I felt enchanted, as if a spell were placed over me. Duke made you feel that you could do anything. It was a gift."⁴

Many of the instrumental tracks were released later that year as *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*, but the recordings featuring Sathima were held back. The rumor was that Sinatra didn't consider her voice to be commercial enough and the tapes soon disappeared. Only thirty years later with the help of Billy Strayhorn biographer David Hajdu were the master recordings finally delivered to Sathima and she was able to release them for the first time in 1997. So while Abdullah's career excelled at the time with the association to the Duke Ellington brand, Sathima was temporarily left to forge a reputation through other means.

By 1965, Sathima and Abdullah had moved to London and from there were booked to perform in the United States at the Newport Jazz Festival. This time Ellington made sure Sathima was heard when he invited her to perform with his band. Ellington continued his support of his South African friends by encouraging them to stay in New York and securing them Musicians' Union and cabaret cards. This was followed by several more performances with the Ellington band along the East Coast. Interaction with the famed composer certainly helped, but the mid-1960s was generally a dismal time for jazz musicians in the United States and work was scarce. In the wake of rock and roll and the English invasion, performance venues and recording opportunities for jazz were drying up.

By 1970, the two were on the road again, including the day Sathima gave birth to their first child, Tsakwe Adamu Ibrahim, while in Swaziland. With child in tow, Sathima returned to New York yet again at the urging of Ellington who invited her to perform at one of the first Jazz Vespers held at St. Peter's Church. The next several years were spent as traveling musicians moving through Europe, South Africa and New York. Before leaving South Africa on another tour in 1977, Sathima and Abdullah declared their support for the liberation movement spearheaded by the African National Congress. Their publicly stated position was at odds with authorities and the couple found themselves no longer welcome in their homeland; they were now officially exiles.

Another strong declaration was made that year by Abdullah when he told Sathima he would no longer accompany her on piano. He encouraged her to instead find musicians from New York's finest and develop her own following. Overcoming her initial fear, she not only found accompanying musicians, but

⁴ 139.

founded her own record company. In 1979, Sathima launched Ekapa Records with Ekapa translating as “at the Cape,” reflecting her South African heritage. Her naiveté about the music business is uncomfortably clear when Sathima admitted to Muller that she got as far as recording an entire album, having it mixed, mastered, duplicated and packaged, before realizing she had no idea how to get the product distributed. Fortunately, the positive response the recordings received led to a distributor reaching out to her and *Sathima Sings Ellington* was followed by a string of critically praised Ekapa albums.

In the following decades, Sathima continued producing her own music while still promoting the career of Abdullah. It was during these years that Muller and Sathima began corresponding, eventually resulting in the book *Musical Echoes*. There are times that Muller seems distracted by which story she desires to tell more: that of Sathima or of the plight of jazz development against the backdrop of apartheid South Africa. Both are delivered with full compassion and unflappable research. One can sense that nothing motivates Muller more than a musicological rock found unturned. Therein lies my only issue with the book—it has two agendas. They are both worthy of telling and expressed here exceedingly well, but it feels at times like two books interspersed within the same cover. Just as the narrative of Sathima and Abdullah is taking shape, we are pulled away to the depths of apartheid policy and its cultural ramifications. On the other hand, if I were hoping to find an exemplary text documenting apartheid’s effect on the eventual diaspora of African jazz, I might find the focus on Sathima and her immediate circle to be all too narrow a sample. Muller is asking that the reader think on grand terms and embrace Sathima as an archetype of a generation and gender during a tumultuous time in the history of South Africa juxtaposed against the expansion of jazz towards a true world music. And indeed she is successful at this challenging task. But, any casual fan of Sathima’s music will not find this a page-turner. This book requires an investment of the mind and an opening of the heart—not attributes easily found within the same reader. *Musical Echoes* is a wide reaching and important missing link in the development of late twentieth-century jazz. This book needed to be written and deserves to be read with the same patient attention to detail as was poured into it by the author.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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