

“Marabi Nights”: An Enlightening History Of Another Jazz

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Marabi Nights: Jazz, 'race' and society in early apartheid South Africa. By Christopher Ballantine. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012. 280 pp.

The question of just what the term ‘jazz’ comprises has been a contemporary and historical concern among musicians, fans, and historians, and the canonical American jazz tradition is often used as the sole or primary narrative. But jazz has had many international incarnations that complicate and enrich the story. The aesthetic roots of jazz in African cultural history have been emphasized in discussions of both American and international practice, to both enlightening and overly-reductive effects; but what of African traditions *contemporary to* the emergence of jazz? Christopher Ballantine's study of the emergence of a South African jazz tradition beginning in the 1920s, with roots in the 19th century and branches that reach through the 1950s—has given jazz fans, musicians, and scholars a culturally parallel genealogy to that of American Jazz. The early incarnations of this jazz have been underemphasized both in and out of South Africa, shielded from view by more well-known genres such as *isicathamiya*, the famed vocal music of the Zulu working class. This book works to restore the reputation of this significant international jazz tradition. Initially published in 1993 by Ravan Press and Ohio University Press, *Marabi Nights: Jazz, 'race' and society in early apartheid South Africa* has been reissued with a new afterward that gives this sibling of American Jazz even more historical context.

Marabi—often analogized as a South African “blues”—emerged as a working class performance tradition at illicit late-night “Concert and Dance” events, commonly held at local *shabeens* (backroom speakeasies) and including vaudeville entertainers (with strong historical influences derived from touring American minstrelsy). This improvisatory party music—based on short, oscillating, syncopated chordal cycles rendered on a keyboard, guitar, or banjo—was shaped by American and European musical and economic influences, as well as local aesthetic and social forces. Ballantine emphasizes the expressive tension that manifested the oppressive colonial legacy, the appropriation of Western models, and the inclusion of local, traditional, and

vernacular culture. The repertoire (which varied regionally and ethnically) drew most strongly upon contemporary African-American jazz traditions, which were becoming increasingly available due to the growing international circulation of records and films; however local vernacular melodies (Sotho, Xhoso, Zulu and African Christian ceremonial melodies) were also commonly incorporated into this larger aesthetic frame. The extended, improvisatory performance format allowed musicians who could not afford training or lessons a venue in which to hone their musical abilities, as they articulated burgeoning sociomusical tensions.

The *shabeen* performance milieu often led to public suspicion and condemnation, based on wider racial prejudices, and *marabi* was frequently described as a kind of social pathology, often in deeply internalized gendered or class-based terms. As its popularity grew, the public's familiarity with the genre increased during the 1930s and '40s, and discourses of "refinement" allowed *marabi* a new, temporary respite. But as the music changed character over those decades, it also became associated with active moral stances, what Ballantine, in his second chapter calls "liberal" and "radical" views of music's possibility. Holders of the former view took this black expressive culture as proof of assiduous dedication to work, strong ethical character, and refined taste, and felt confident that the self-evidence of these positive aspects would break down prejudices and inequalities over time. Those espousing the latter perspective rejected this aspirational stance and wanted to explicitly associate radical political groups (e.g., the ICU or Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union) with the "jazzing" subculture.

Once the expectations of *marabi* had been established, the explicit foregrounding of the African aspects became a thrilling—even unsettling—possibility. These interpretations led to concerns over whether the "music itself" should change along with these stances, strategically emphasizing perceived American or African aesthetic aspects. This process later resulted in the transformation of *marabi* legacies into more well known (and politically charged) genres such as *mbaqanga*. But in the late 1940s and '50s, (as with the initial appropriation of hot jazz models) musicians appropriated the close harmony singing of American groups such as the Mills Brothers as an aesthetic frame. This was not (as was often charged) a wholesale imitation. At the same time as Gallo recording artists The Manhattan Brothers (Ballantine's central example) imitated and appropriated these foreign models, they concentrated explicitly on developing their own "African" voice, training carefully in Zulu *isicathamiya* performance. Bantu languages were used, and lyrical concerns shifted to more explicitly economic and political statements. Ironically, however, they were simultaneously compelled to rearrange and

rewrite their own “Laku Tshoni ‘Langa” (recorded in 1954) as “Lovely Lies” in order to attempt crossover success in the United States, a move which allowed the song to reach #45 on the Billboard “Hot One Hundred” charts in 1956.

The book’s introduction initially declares the author’s intention to place music inside a broader sociopolitical history, citing Adornian concepts of political economy. This gesture may have seemed necessary in the 1990s, but now appears at first to emphasize a commonly assumed distinction between “music” and “culture,” a conceptual separation belied by the author’s overall argument. Indeed, his explicit breakdown of the musical implications of distinctions in race, class, and gender in the emergence of this expressive practice clearly demonstrate the inseparability of “music” and “culture.”¹ After setting up the extremely popular Manhattan Brothers at the center of these cross-cultural aesthetic tensions, Ballantine uses a close analysis of their repertoire to critique South African society in the 1950s, in a very compelling final chapter. He first describes a sudden marginalization of female performers, and a masculinization of performance practice. He then partially explains this trend as a response to the shifting gender relations necessitated by forced labor migrancy initiated in the late 1940s, which profoundly disturbed the black, urban family and resulted in a distinct change in women’s domestic and political power. A large corpus of music by the Manhattan Brothers is then analyzed to reveal aspects of these trends, both lyrically and musically, in rich (though succinct) detail, demonstrating music’s power to articulate multivalence and contradiction, and fulfilling the author’s original promise to link aesthetic micro- and social macro-cosms.

Ballantine’s judicious inclusion of quotes from contemporary journalists, and his use of interviews with musicians and scholars (well documented through endnotes) lend credibility to his tale. And the occasional use of an eyebrow-raising idiom [“he took lessons in classical piano from a white lady teacher” (43)] adds (to my ear, at least) a distinctive authorial voice that inspires confidence rather than skepticism. Specific to its time and place as *marabi* and its musical offspring may be, Ballantine’s reading of its emergence and transformation may also be used as an explanatory template for other musical trends. To wit, the new afterward points out how the post-apartheid musical phenomenon of *kwaito* developed parallel to similar moral and political arcs as had *marabi*. And the parallels and connections to the histories of American Jazz make this valuable reading for serious jazz fans and scholars.

¹ For a clear examination of this issue, see Timothy Rice’s essay, “Toward the Remodeling of Ethnomusicology” (*Ethnomusicology* 31/32 1987)

Sixteen black & white plates of publicity photos and promotional material add a visual perspective, and an included audio CD is filled with excellent and rare musical examples, each described in detail in an appendix.

About the Contributor

JONATHAN T. KING holds a B.A. from Amherst College, a M.S. from the University of Montana, Missoula, and an M.A., M. Phil., and Ph.D. in Music from Columbia University. He wrote his dissertation on improvisatory music performance. Other areas of interest include American vernacular musics, North American popular music, East and West African musical traditions, music and language, critical genre studies, and creative improvisatory practice. He has taught classes examining the relationship of music with language, social identity, modernism, cosmopolitanism, orientalism, and political power.