

## Review

Coplan, D. 2008. *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 13 978-0-226-11567-2 (pbk). 455 pp. US\$60.75.

The first edition of *In Township Tonight!* (1985) was based on David B. Coplan's PhD research into local music and theatre in apartheid South Africa during the 1970s. In his fieldwork, Coplan experienced interrogation by the white police force for various misdemeanours he made in his musical pursuits with black musicians and was exiled from South Africa between 1977 and 1991. He maintained close links, however, to the informants with whom he had established bonds of musician-ship and friendship. It is therefore understandable that his writing demonstrates passion as well as authority, given that he obviously feels that he has, to some extent, experienced and shared the repression of his informants. Whereas the first edition of this book ends during the period of apartheid, this second edition has been extended to include accounts of the post-apartheid black musicians' experience in multi-cultural South Africa.

*In Township Tonight!* is an uncommon academic work that is both authoritative and informative while also being, on another level, a fascinating and compelling read. Coplan takes the reader through the many historical phases of black South African culture, starting with the commercial involvement of white people in African culture during the seventeenth century, before ultimately providing his account of musical and theatrical change since the events of the early 1990s. He also includes a brief and refreshing reappraisal of Paul Simon's involvement in South African music during the late 1980s. Unlike some other studies in this field, Coplan constructs his ethnological and cultural framework on information drawn from four of the principal tribal clans, as well as from a variety of secondary sources that include police and colonial records and accounts from newspaper reports by black and white authors. These sources describe the depths of deprivation endured by black artists who created a native African musical and theatrical identity in the face of near-overwhelming white opposition. Moreover, Coplan presents the reader with an uplifting account of black South African artists' eventual victory in this struggle.

Coplan has avoided an in-depth musicological analysis of black South African music in favour of a sometimes political but overwhelmingly cultural approach that

is as rewarding for the lay reader as it is for the experienced scholar. If criticism were to be levelled at Coplan's study, however, it would be that his enthusiastic bond with his informants and their music occasionally leads him away from impartiality. For example, during chapters concerning music and theatre during the twentieth century, one soon becomes aware that Coplan's consuming musical passion is jazz, and that other styles sometimes become reduced to lesser importance, despite his enthusiastic praise of them and the painstakingly detailed lists of band personnel he provides. Equally, black theatre in South Africa does not always receive the same depth of cultural analysis as does black music, an issue Coplan eventually rectifies in Chapter 11. On the question of external artistic influences, he gives a misleading impression that the musical production of *King Kong* in the late 1950s was principally a black promotion and that it had a significant influence on artistic trends at the time. That said, Coplan does point out that from the 1920s onwards, most musical and theatrical influences came from the United States, and that jazz and blues became the core styles in many popular music genres. More importantly, Coplan states that there has always been a process of adaptation and reorganization in South African music and theatre that is the result of a need to command the respect of both black and white cultures. For Coplan, this is not acculturation (which he regards as an outmoded concept, given that, in a colonialist formulation, culture follows power) but a fortunate process of 'mix and match' (401).

A further minor criticism lies in Coplan's discussion of musical events since the abandonment of the apartheid system. Whereas earlier chapters succinctly pay homage to the protagonists of South African black music and theatre while providing in-depth cultural analysis of various periods and styles, the new chapters occasionally drift into a slightly subjective, anecdotal style that sometimes lacks the earlier concise viewpoint. For example, in a discussion on Hugh Masekela's reticence about becoming involved in post-apartheid musical activities in South Africa, Coplan states:

With encouragement from his friends and fans, Hugh pulled himself together in 1991 and put together 'Sekunjalo', a musical concert tour of South Africa featuring dozens of local vocalists and instrumentalists from a range of stylistic backgrounds (340).

It may be, however, that this style is the means by which Coplan demonstrates that he has relocated his cogent approach to contemporary events, and that he remains an authority who is fortunate to be acquainted on artistic and personal levels with those South African music performers who are at the forefront of the style.

*In Township Tonight!* represents Coplan's solid academic rigour and, moreover, serves as a testament to the many South African performers who would other-

wise remain unknown outside that country. As Coplan states, Ladysmith Black Mambazo were already comparatively wealthy men by the time they worked with Paul Simon, whose reputation enabled their ascent to the world stage. Coplan has paid tribute to many of those artists who have not had that opportunity, while giving the reader a plethora of names for future investigation. This book remains among the leading works on contemporary South African music, such as Louise Meintjes' *Sound of Africa* (2003) and Gwen Ansell's *Soweto Blues* (2004). Coplan has successfully negotiated a path that links South African history, culture and music, and he has provided a comprehensive overview of a now multi-cultural landscape in that country.

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