



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

An interview with David Coplan, the author of In Township Tonight!

Rijven, Stan

Citation

Rijven, S. (1988). An interview with David Coplan, the author of *In Township Tonight!*. *Leidschrift : Black Culture In South Africa*, 4(Juni), 33-41. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72927>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72927>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**'A STORY THAT HAS NEVER BEEN TOLD';
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID COPLAN, THE AUTHOR OF IN
TOWNSHIP TONIGHT!¹**

Stan Rijven

On the second of December, 1497, when Vasco Da Gama became the first white man to set foot in Southern Africa, he was greeted by a group of Khoi musicians. "They were playing four or five flutes simultaneously in harmony", according to the logbook. A century and a half later West European instruments had made their entrance on a large scale:

Almost all country estates kept slaves who played in orchestras with as many as thirty musicians. The Dutch governor owned his own slave orchestra as early as 1676, and most of the music at public functions was performed by slaves. At weekends, the colonists visited Cape Town's taverns to hear 'violins, flutes, hautboys, trumpets, harps and other instruments' played by slaves whose owners had bought them especially for their musical skills, according to David Copland in his fascinating book *In Township Tonight!*²

This American historian, anthropologist and musicologist visited South Africa many times from 1975 onwards. Initially, he came as a researcher for a series of films on ethnic music. Once in the grip of his subject, he started a book on the history of South African music that can, without exaggeration, be called the standard work on the subject. In this absorbing study Copland takes into account the socio-historical circumstances, including the role of colonialism, the effects of the industrial boom in the Transvaal and Sophiatown, the influence of the church, the apartheid system and the differentiation of various tribes, each with its own cultural background. In this way, a complete picture forms, complete because this is what it takes to make the relation clear between the origin and the development of the innumerable different genres of music. The mbaqanga, the gumboots, vaudeville, penny whistlers, marabi, kwela and all the rest: everything falls logically into place. Not until after having read this book, does one realise how a vocal ensemble like

Stan Rijven

Ladysmith Black Mambazo is a continuation of a long tradition which started in the previous century. Anyone who still talks about the lack of African and the excess of Western influence on South African music will be silenced by this book. The interaction has been going on for centuries.

Until recently, no comprehensive overview had been given of the way in which this music culture has developed up to the present day. With David Coplan's *In Township Tonight!; South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* this gap was filled in one fell swoop. Not only the thoroughness of his research, but, above all, his width of vision make *In Township Tonight!* a standard work. I talked with the author about the relation between apartheid and music, thus inevitably also about *Graceland* by Paul Simon.

Could you give a description of In Township Tonight!?

The book is an addition to works on the cultural history of South Africa and it gives an analysis of the destructive effects of apartheid on music and theatre. Furthermore, I establish the way in which black South Africans have used their popular culture to preserve their own identity, how they speak for their community and how they try to preserve their humanity in this way.

How was this book written?

I have been active for seventeen years as a researcher, writer and as a co-ordinator of field research on present-day African music and theatre. The most fascinating aspect of this is their complete integration into daily life. Music and theatre are closely related to the different social and economic processes, you cannot set them apart. Furthermore, I am fascinated by the vitality, the energy and the aesthetic beauty radiating from them. On the basis of a publication on high life in Ghana, I was invited in 1975 by the cineast Guy Enzinger to come to South Africa to do research for a film on the ethnic music of the black South

Africans. Having stayed there a couple of months, I returned not only with a report, but also with the notion that an enormously rich and deep-rooted urban black culture is alive in South Africa, a culture of which the complete story had never been told.

Gradually, I started to consider the music and theatre of the black communities as a key to understanding black people's lives in the South African cities. Since then, I have spent two years in South Africa, in 1976 and 1978, in order to map out the whole process from the migration to the cities on to the present cultural development. One of the results is the book *In Township Tonight!*.

As an example of how music is interwoven with the colonial history, Coplan brings up the origin of the kwela music with the penny whistle as its main instrument.

There are different versions of and ideas on the introduction of the penny whistle. Still, the most plausible explanation seems to be that it was introduced by the European fyfe and drumbands, especially during the Boer War. The South African population had never seen so many young Europeans in uniform and then even marching to the beat of the music. That certainly had an effect. Above all amongst young domestic servants the penny whistle was well-liked. These people had come from the north to find a job with the white South Africans. The tribes from the north, like the Venda had a long tradition with the playing of the flute. These youngsters, twelve years or even younger, were in great demand as they had to take the place of servant girls, who were too often abused by their white masters. The white housewives wanted adult men in the household, but this also gave rise to jealousy. Thus boys of scarcely twelve became well liked as domestic servants. They were, however, so exploited that they organised themselves in gangs. The payable penny whistle was often their only possession and refuge. They formed a sort of street big bands and gave their own interpretation of the mainly American music styles from which the kwela developed. In Zulu, kwela means to jump up or to get up and this was the feeling

Stan Rijven

associated with this spontaneous music that could be played everywhere. But all too often, these boys played a game of dice, were startled by the police, jumped up, i.e. kwela, and quickly reached for their instruments!

The last couple of years, Coplan has not visited South Africa again, but, according to him, the music life has changed due to the political development.

The time for entertainment is long gone, the time of concerts at which you could sing "Feeling good in Africa, sunshine in Africa" etcetera. Musicians must now express the voice of the people, and the people want politics. This brings the musicians into the position of a tight-rope walker. If they are to open in giving utterance to their dislike, they attract the government's attention and are banned. If they show too little involvement, they are ignored by the audience. Thus they search for solutions to escape the dilemma.

A good example is Philip Tabani from the popular Malani Jazz Group. Once he went on tour in the United States. On his return, people asked: "Why did you go to the U.S.? Why aren't you engaged in politics?" This man sleeps at home in the township every night, he will never spend a night in a hotel even if it means that he has to drive fifty kilometers at two o'clock in the morning to get home. He is a "local guy" who does not change his habits and who does not consort with the white music industry and suchlike. Tabani's songs are metaphores, with deep roots in the African language. In this way, he manages to take a political stand without being considered a political musician by the government. Because he is a "local township guy", he maintains his credibility. But there are people who concern themselves with politics much more openly and who therefore get into more trouble. The group Juluka for instance, forms a threat to the state. They play real Zulu music and make clear that Zulu culture is just as valuable as the white culture, because their

'A Story that has never been told'



**UDF
PEOPLES
FESTIVAL**

SIPHO 'Hot Stix' MABUSE
BRENDA ^{and} _{the} BIG DUDES
SUPA FRIKA HARARI

And supporting acts

FUN VALLEY
10am Sunday 28th April
R6 Book at Computicket

The poster features a central illustration of a group of musicians performing on stage. One man is playing a guitar, another is playing a keyboard, and a woman is singing into a microphone. A small circular logo with 'UDF' and a group of people is in the top right corner.

Poster for UDF Peoples Festival, possibly April 1985, (courtesy of AABN)

Stan Rijven

singer, Johnny Clegg, is after all white. Their songs are about things like migrant work and unemployment, but they would never sing "Murder apartheid, kill the Boers". Then they would immediately be done with. For these reasons, people outside South Africa must show understanding for this dilemma, I think.

In addition, the political situation has a clear influence on the music practice itself. Festivals have always been popular, but since the government discovered a threat in them, a ban was issued. In this way, funerals became opportunities to perform political songs and to express political feelings in unison. Since then, the government has tried to limit the number of participants, because wherever the voice of the people is heard, it makes its influence known. Not even the churches are safe anymore.

How are "the exiles" seen in South Africa, musicians like Abdul Ibrahim, Masekela and Jabula, who live in exile?

They are above all considered the mouthpiece of the South African voice overseas. Even when Julian Bahula, the founder of Jabula, married a white British woman, there were extensive reports about it in black newspapers under headings like "Big Wedding in London". Even though they live thousands of kilometers away, the South Africans still see "the exiles" as an extension of themselves. Besides, their success in exile has had a positive influence on the South African music scene. People always said to me: "We had to go to America to learn to appreciate South Africa". In other words: in America they wanted to play jazz, rock and soul, but they discovered that they could reap more success with their own music. Masekela played more African in New York than he had ever done in Johannesburg. Letta Mbulu and Miriam Makeba included African folk songs and click songs on their *repertoire* when they discovered that the audience did not think much of the American jazz they initially sang. When their records appeared in South Africa, people said: "Hey, there is something good in our own music." Mbulu did not have a hit in South Africa until she went to live in America.

Makeba, Masekela and many others are highly esteemed in South Africa; they gave the local musicians self-confidence.

And how have people reacted to Paul Simon's Graceland?

Graceland was not very popular in South Africa, contrary to Zimbabwe and other countries. People had the feeling that Paul Simon just used the music they themselves knew so well. South Africans do understand why it happened, but *Graceland* is not a record they would buy. For white people, on the other hand, it is. For them it was a way of getting to know their own country's music which, up till then, they did not know existed. I always thought it very strange to find that white people did not know of one single black artist or style. At the most, they have heard about Masekela and Makeba. Maybe Paul Simon has made them wake up to black African music.

What is your opinion of the Graceland project?

Ironically, this is a middle-aged white American star from the 1960s, who before 1984 had presumably never heard a note of African music. By reviving his own career, he brings international attention to this music in a previously unknown way. Even though Simon may have had a naïve attitude to the cultural boycott with respect to apartheid, he must have felt instinctively that an album based on the music of the most heavily oppressed in Africa would draw more attention than any other kind of hybrid music. Neither the black cajuns (represented on *Graceland* by Rockin' Dopsie & His Cajun Twisters, S.R.), who in American society occupy a kind of third world position, nor the West Africans and other third world musicians who participate on the record have profited from it at all, let alone that they were allowed to share in the triumph of the *Graceland* tour. If Paul Simon wants to base his career on South African creativity, he could at least try to serve the cause with songs directly referring to the political situation.

Stan Rijven

Still, there were unintended positive effects. Even though Graceland clearly represents a form of mass culture, the interest in the participating South African musicians and the extraordinary feelings of friendship and involvement during the concerts have created a new image of black South Africans. Namely that we are dealing with creative fellow human beings, worthy of our respect and esteem. The concerts which Ladysmith Black Mambazo gave later helped both remind and convince the American audience of the fact that every life that is lost in South African torture is the life of a civilised, developed human being and not of an uproarious savage. If politicians, writers or even photographers can achieve something like this with their charisma, why should Ladysmith Black Mambazo not be allowed to do it with their music.

What do you think of the lack of political involvement that Ladysmith is often reproached with?

There has been a lot of journalistic squabble over the question why Ladysmith Black Mambazo sings mainly about Christianity and other "neutral" subjects, and why they persistently avoid political statements in interviews. They do this because they are really sincere converts to Christianity and because they do not want their right to international travel to be taken away by an insulted South African regime. Is that the price they have to pay for wealth and fame, should they therefore have to be boycotted or at least called over the coals by approved "solidarity groups"? Besides, people who know about the life of black labourers in South Africa and about the life of the band leader Joseph Shabalala and the career of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, know that there is more to their music than the Western ear can hear. Shabalala and his group got together for the first time when they were still migrant workers at a factory in Durban. In songs like 'Stimela' (The train, S.R.) which incidentally sold very well and made Joseph a wealthy man in South Africa years before Paul Simon arrived, Shabalala drew the attention to the misery of the migrant workers. Men who were forced until their old age to

move back and forth between odd places of work and their residence in the countryside where they could never really feel at home. By using the African traditions of metaphor and indirectness, Shabalala translated the people's culture into a mass culture. The people listened and were moved. Americans who do not know a word of Zulu can also listen and be moved.

Finally, what is your opinion of the ban on the import of books and records in South Africa?

Should the protest songs dedicated to Nelson Mandela by innumerable American, British, West Indian and African artists only be heard outside South Africa? This kind of music does reach the people in South Africa, I can assure you. In 1976, for instance, the reggae music of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Jimmy Cliff provided the inspiration for protesting students in Soweto. I know, because I was there. I heard the children sing when they tried to ward off the bullets with stones and dustbin lids. Even the soul hit 'Wake up everybody' by Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes became the standard cry during demonstrations. As for books: I have made certain that *In Township Tonight!* was marketed in South Africa. Who will profit from it? Ravan Press, one of the most progressive cultural publishers in South Africa. Should the result of all my work be reserved exclusively for Western readers and not be available for the members of the community which form the subject of it?

Translation by Kersti Börjars.

Notes

1. David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!; South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Longman, London and New York, 1985, 278 pp. Dfl 36,70.
2. Ibidem, 10.