

## Review

Christopher Ballantine (2012) *Marabi Nights: jazz, 'race' and society in early apartheid South Africa* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press\*

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Being a part of this event is a big deal to me because *Marabi Nights* is not as Gwen Ansell describes the first edition of Christopher Ballantine's book "one of a few seminal works in SA jazz history". Rather, it is *the* seminal work in South African jazz studies.

For the few that may need reminding, the first edition of *Marabi Nights* was groundbreaking. Based on painstaking archival and oral history research in the 1980s with some 60 interviewees, it brought to national and international attention a vital South African music culture that was in danger of being forgotten forever. Although his sources were widely dispersed and, I would guess, often difficult to track down, Chris Ballantine fashioned these disparate fragments of information into a history that is compellingly rich and evocative. Direct quotations from interviews and other primary sources are so deftly interwoven into the narrative that the book along with the fantastic CD that accompanies it, is often a portal *to* the times and places it describes. Here's critic Walter Nhlapo describing pianist Toko Khampepe (on page 22):

It is wonderful how he pounds the piano. As time marches on, charmed by the strains of music, for it is said, 'music hath its charms', he becomes hotter and hotter, bangs the instrument, leaves his stool, knees on the ground, plays with his back towards the piano, sits on the keyboard and plays with his haunches. Such playing is seen in Harlem.

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\* Edited guest speech at the launch at the Centre for Jazz and Popular Music, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Or Peter Rezant on the Merry Blackbirds (27):

So when the crowds would hear ‘Chattanooga Choochoo’, after the picture had been shown, oh, they would go mad, mad, mad, mad, mad! The police couldn’t stop them away from the doors in the places outside Johannesburg where we would go to, when they hear that sound.

As Sibongile Khumalo remarks in the foreword, the author captures “beyond academic pursuance, the ‘feel’ of how township jazz evolved”.

And if that is all the book did, that would be more than enough. But *Marabi Nights* is as intellectually provocative as it is emotionally evocative. As Ballantine puts it (13):

All stories ... are about more than just the flows, tensions, and details of their own narrative. They also open upon broader perspective, provide ways of thinking about more general issues, support and undermine related arguments, developed elsewhere in other narratives.

Key among those other narratives for Ballantine, is the work of Theodor Adorno who emphasises the ways in which music cultures are shaped by their social and political contexts. Bringing Adorno’s thought into dialogue with the work of important South African scholars like Tim Couzens, William Beinart, Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone, Ballantine lays bare the grammars of oppression and resistance that shaped the development of township jazz. In the process he develops a uniquely postcolonial take on Adorno’s philosophy by escorting the pessimistic, Eurocentric Adorno into an irrepressibly optimistic, African, proletarian musical and social context that Adorno might have found rather educational. Likewise the book teaches us that the arts and social sciences have much to learn from one another. In this sense, *Marabi Nights* was and remains epistemologically pioneering. Informed by a deeply dialectical ethos, it achieves a genuinely interdisciplinary synthesis of humanities and social science modes of thinking. No wonder Sibongile Khumalo’s mentor and father Khabi Mngoma insisted she read the book when it first came out!

Empirically rich, theoretically adroit, and elegantly written, *Marabi Nights* is needless to say, an outstanding teaching resource. In addition to acquainting students with a vital history, the book is great for teaching them how to write rich descriptions; how to tease out the reasearch questions that frame an author’s argument; how to ask and effectively answer complex questions about the interrelationships among musical sounds and their social histories. It helps no end that the book is so astutely paced. The

'Concert and Dance' chapter is predominantly descriptive; the 'music and emancipation' is more complex but its underlying argument is beautifully apposite and clear. The final chapter on 'Gender and Migrancy' tackles huge and very complex issues of gender, class, 'race', power *and* the contradictory ways in which they find expression at the level of music details. But especially if read after the preceding chapters, these arguments become quite easy to follow and grasp. Of course this none of this will come as any surprise to those of us who were lucky to have taken Chris's meticulously prepared lectures and seminars.

For me though, what makes the work special is that it is clearly a labour of love, informed by a deep commitment to transformation long before that idea had gained currency. It's worth remembering that Chris Ballantine's earlier work on western art music was also pioneering. It predated celebrated work by scholars like Susan McClary by over a decade. By the late 1980s and early 1990s when *Marabi Nights* was being written such work on western art music and its social meanings was becoming fashionable, and it would have been all too easy for Chris to have stayed on that path, access the big prestigious publishers, a larger and wealthier market for books on art music and so on. The research would have been easier to do too: readily available scores and other sources in well resourced archives and libraries, rather than tracking down interviewees, and drawing unnecessary attention to oneself in the context of a mad police state.

But because of Chris's painstaking work, a vibrant history has *not* been lost. And *Marabi Nights* is the foundation which has made possible, and will continue to make possible, other studies of South African jazz. And for those us invested in the project of developing African scholarship, or teaching a politically invested musicology, *Marabi Nights* becomes an essential item on our class reading lists. But most importantly in a local and increasingly global context that is plagued by 'race' thinking and class inequality, *Marabi Nights* is as relevant now as it was 18 years ago.

Read it; read it again; prescribe it in your classrooms and encourage everyone with an interest in jazz, 'race', society, apartheid and South Africa to read it too!