

# AFRICAN MUSIC

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY OF AFRICAN MUSIC

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VOLUME 6

1987

NUMBER 4

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## A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

The boy wandering through the veld saw an anthill. He thought there might be something inside and he kicked a hole in it with his toe. Yes, it was nice, it was exciting, and he enjoyed it for a while.

South Africa is like an anthill, plastered over with its determination to be isolated. The boy is American singer Paul Simon who has kicked a hole in the South African pop music industry with his record "Graceland", and allowed the outside world and South African artists a glimpse of each other. The popularity of the record can be gauged by its winning the Album of the Year Grammy Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (USA) and in South Africa by its producer gleefully boasting of its "going platinum" three times already.

Two questions arise which are difficult to separate: whether this phenomenon has been good for the musicians and the music industry, and whether it is good music, or good African music. (As a multi-track recording, made at different times in several studios on both sides and ends of the Atlantic, is it real people's music at all? But that is another question.) Some have found Simon's songs an obstacle to their enjoying the South African sounds of the backings . . . oil on water. The words, poetic though they may be, relate remotely, if at all, to the South Africa of the musicians. As Stephen Holden wrote in the New York Times, ". . . one gets the sense of an artist submitting to, and being swept up by, musical forces he does not totally understand." The backings are African, the sensibility remains 'international' — read 'for White ears'.

That this undoubtedly means success for the musicians and the trade has to be balanced against ultimate musical and personal values, and the perpetuation of popular stereotypes, e.g. that Africa provides the rhythm section, the body of the pop music world, while Europe provides the melody, the head. Another is that it is the Black man's job to help the White man do his thing. History repeats itself; musically and artistically nothing has changed. Is African music only good for backings, not frontings? Readers of African Music will presumably have strong ideas on this.

As to the first question, there is no doubt that Simon's good relations with and treatment of the musicians, the smiles all round, the fortunes made, the exposure, the proliferation of would-be groups in the Graceland mould, have already proved it a practical success. It's good to be noticed, to get a pat on the back from big brother. Simon has opened a window in the anthill and given renewed confidence to South African musicians. When the boy moves on to find another anthill we have to keep that window open faster than anybody can plaster it up.