

## JOHN BLACKING: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

by

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John Blacking was sixty one when he died on 24 January, 1990. I knew him for the last twenty five of those years: first as one of my teachers, soon as a loyal friend, finally as a colleague. The boundaries between these were never rigid — not even when I was an undergraduate and he a lecturer (and then Professor of Social Anthropology) at the University of the Witwatersrand. The unity of these roles is a circumstance which I note warmly and with admiration, and which I think of as part of the way John always lived out his fundamental humanness. But if I am briefly to make a personal tribute to John Blacking, I must select, must disturb that unity. So I recall what is most compelling in this context: I think of him as I knew him first — in my years at Wits before I left for Cambridge. I think of him as a teacher. (He would have understood that well: in his office there used to hang — and probably did until the end — a picture of one of *his* teachers, Meyer Fortes, erstwhile William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge.)

Certainly at Wits in the sixties John's fame preceded him. I was reading music and English literature, but hearing continually about a brilliant and dynamic young anthropology lecturer. Here, it seemed, was charisma itself. His lectures (this was widely known) were packed, his students uncommonly attentive. I met him eventually along another path — one that I quickly realized was inseparable from his "official" pursuits: that path was music. He was the energetic and painstaking conductor of the Witwatersrand University Choir when I joined it, and we soon found ourselves playing keyboard works together. Later, we made field recordings: I was researching traditional Tswana pipe-ensemble music for a fourth-year long essay, and had asked John to be my supervisor. It was in such contexts that I first watched him restoring the unities that our conventional, reified 'disciplines' had torn apart: not for him humankind *and* their music, or music *and* history, but rather humankind, history and social formations *through* and *in* music. These were intuitions I was myself trying to give voice to, and John's passionate conviction not only about this seamless whole but also about its being *demonstrable*, was a beacon in the dark and lifeless world of positivistic musicology.

I took this to be an aspect of the fiercely original cast of John Blacking's mind — and indeed it was. John was always seeking new connections, trying to put things (back) together, and doing so in new ways. Even when this felt like 'kite-flying', it was an invigorating challenge, a confrontation to one's received categories, and an invitation to reconceptualize the world. He loved a good argument, and it was a lesson in itself to me that he could concede so graciously in defeat. But more often than not he was right. He traversed with ease the terrain between analysis and synthesis, moving imaginatively between domains and levels normally held to be discrete and incommensurable. One of these domains was usually the social, frequently at both the 'macro' and the 'micro' ends. I recall — at random — a discussion we once had at a concert. White South Africans, he declared, are merely *touchy*; their society has prevented them from learning what it means to be truly *sensitive*.

To a young student struggling with the implications of growing up white in South Africa, and asking what he might do to help combat so vicious and brutal a social order, John's deep and compassionate concern was profoundly inspirational. Not merely because his outrage at the horrors of capitalism, class society, and racism was so visible and so vocal, but also because his intellectual pursuits concerned so fundamentally the process of being — of becoming — human. "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu": a person is a person because of other people. I first heard this wonderful Zulu proverb from him; and his teaching, research, and involvement with music generally, enabled me to understand its import precisely and concretely. His lectures on African music made the same point. "In this music", I remember him saying, "no *note* is alone, because no *person* is alone." What already underpinned John's work at that time — indeed, what continued to underpin it until his untimely death — was his wish to help build a truly human world; and his clear understanding that, for such a world to be built, social structures would have to be changed fundamentally.

There are at least two ironies here, both of them painful. The first is that the bedrock upon which John's published work rests is his research among the Venda people of the northern Transvaal. As black South Africans, they form part of one of the most oppressed populations in the world — and yet the richness and the resilience of (what he would call) their "humanly organised sound" and "soundly organized humanity" provided John with the materials out of which he forged some of his most powerful arguments against inhumanity everywhere.

The second irony has to do with the fact that this tribute is written for a South African publication. We tend to think of John Blacking as a scholar of South African music — and not without justification. The irony I have in mind has nothing to do with the fact that he was actually British, and that he lived here only from 1954 to 1969. Rather, it is that he was not *still* here at the end of his life. For had our society been different, he would probably never have gone. More precisely: he left because he was driven out. Abroad, he and Zureena could live without harrassment, free of the midnight intrusions of a police force zealously acting on behalf of a white elite that sought to criminalize their loving relationship in terms of the racist Immorality Act. A more immediate form of this irony lies in the reflection that some years later — it was around the mid-seventies — when I was seeking support for a motivation that John Blacking be invited to South Africa as an eminent visiting professor, one of the most senior and august members of this country's (Eurocentric) musicological establishment vetoed the idea, on the grounds that Blacking had "not behaved himself" while he was here.

In losing John Blacking — in making it impossible for him to remain here — South Africa lost one of its most gifted scholars: and one who had at least as much to say to those concerned with Western music, as to those who work in domains traditional to ethnomusicology. One cannot undo the sins of the past; but one might permit oneself the paradoxical hope that his death might stimulate our related disciplines at last to begin responding creatively to the full significance of his work.