

he died in his home at Singano on the 25th July 1987, at the age of only forty years.

One wonders sometimes what would have happened to the Kachamba brothers, and indeed to the whole Singano musical corpus, had they never been taken up by Gerhard Kubik. Their careers might have been different, but it is unlikely that they would never have attained some measure of international recognition. One must pay tribute nevertheless to that most considerable figure in African ethnomusicology, for the part he has played not only in making the Singano school of African popular music widely known, but for his personal concern and friendship for the musicians as individuals. His scholarship and analytical powers are very well shown in the pamphlet which accompanies the cassette. It is appropriate that one of the songs should be a tribute to him.

G.T. Nurse, London

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"ROOTS OF RHYTHM: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF EAST AFRICA", video with booklet, Jacaranda Designs Ltd, Nairobi, 1995.

A promising title leads to nothing but an example of the trivialisation and commercialisation of African culture. An apparently African boy with an English regional accent wanders into a Nairobi music shop, sees a vision of a pop group performing, and next wakes up in the bush surrounded by four people making musical instruments. One would naturally expect these to be experts, but no...none of them appear to assemble or play their instruments with any sign of expertise. The boy then tries, and fails, to play the instruments, the shot returns to the group in the shop, now including the 'traditional' musicians, all attempting to mime to the pop soundtrack, and that, unbelievably, is it! The accompanying booklet invites the reader to purchase 'Afri-kits' containing "authentic, hand-crafted instruments" and other goods. Nowhere is there any indication that these instruments are not toys but the tools of a real culture. This publication regrettably does not touch it.

Andrew Tracey, International Library of African Music

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ORIGINS OF THE POPULAR STYLE: THE ANTECEDENTS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY POPULAR MUSIC, by Peter van der Merwe, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp.352.

As the author intimates in his Preface, this book is the fruit of some twenty years' passionate sleuthing through the annals of parlour song, folk-song, hymn, ballad, early blues, and other sources available to him. Van der Merwe is extremely good at sourcing examples and has tracked down some gems. The discoveries he has made are fascinating and concrete and he has revealed many unexpected connections. The theory underlying his quest and the conclusions he has drawn from it are, however, harder to pin down, and it is this lack of theoretical framework that bothers me most,

not because one necessarily needs a theory of popular music in order to write about it, but simply because a hypothesis would give the wealth of material in the book more of a sense of direction.

Perhaps this very lack is what lends the book its most remarkable quality, its ingenuousness; or possibly this is the result of what van der Merwe himself candidly describes as “a blithe ignorance of the scope of the subject”. In a chatty, at times self-effacing tone — indeed the apologia in the early chapters were sometimes overdone — van der Merwe writes a book that he claims is not primarily about American music, not concerned with “superficial things” like pitch, tempo, dynamics and instrumentation, “not a work of criticism” nor “a work of sociology”. Yet despite all that it is not, it covers music “from primordial times to about 1900” (it is characteristic of van der Merwe that he uses an expression of such refined caution as “about 1900”, after the cheery generalisation of “primordial times”!), so that one may well ask, and frequently does: What kind of a book is this, and for whom is it intended?

It is certainly substantial in length: 352 pages — 290 pages of text with copious examples, and 62 of appendices and index. It has the sanction, in whole or in part, of scholars like Richard Middleton, Paul Oliver, Gerhard Kubik, David Rycroft and Andrew Tracey. And it is really two books. Chapters 1 to 13 (Parts 1 and 2) give an overview of the many and varied origins of ‘the popular style’ in Europe and North America, and attempt to formulate an argument about why and how these disparate elements came together. Chapters 14 to 29 (Part 3) present detailed musical analyses of the fruits of these ‘origins’, showing musical congruities between British, African and American music. The chief focus is on American blues and British parlour song, with copious examples of the evolution of 12-bar blues and 32-bar song form. Indeed, there are so many pages devoted to the origins of the blues as to make the book somewhat lopsided, or else the title of the book somewhat misleading.

The differences between the two halves of the book are not only those of content and thrust. The first 13 chapters are easily accessible to the general reader. They are interesting, discursive and informative, and rely very little on academic language. The second half of the book, on the other hand, is peppered with musical examples in staff notation and with technical description that only a fairly experienced musician would understand. Given this contradiction, it is difficult to tell what kind of a readership Oxford University Press had in mind when they guided van der Merwe’s manuscript through publication.

My own major criticism is not concerned with any conflict of styles within the book’s design, however, nor with the material presented, which is fascinating. The main problem, it seems to me, is that lack of theoretical direction mentioned earlier. The first half’s beguiling qualities do not, for me, overcome a sense of frustration that there is a highly significant ‘thesis’ upon which the book is predicated, which never quite reaches the surface. That thesis is important because it poses a question central to many preoccupations in ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology today: how do musical cultures cope with the pressures of change brought about by their transplantation from one country to another? One gets a hint of it now and then: on

page 31 there is a claim that “the half- million reluctant emigrants to North America [slaves] took more heptatonic than pentatonic music with them”, followed by the question, “Why then did the pentatonic come to prevail in American music?”.

“Instead of taking up the challenge of answering this question, van der Merwe begs it: “Such puzzles make it impossible to escape from generalities. Something American looks like something African, therefore it was probably derived from something of the kind in some African musical culture — that is what it comes down to; and even then we must be on the lookout for white influence” (p.31). Again on page 66 an exciting possibility for speculating on how it might be that the jawbone-and-key is the antecedent of the washboard dissolves into an evasion: “Such examples could easily be multiplied: tracing American instruments and instrumental techniques back to Africa has become almost an industry these days”.

It’s not enough, for me, to know that “Scottish music at that time was among the most archaic in Europe. It was the music of a people living on the fringes of urban civilization, and this helps explain why it took the fancy of Americans living in similar conditions”. I want to know how and why van der Merwe sees these two “fringe” cultures as being compatible and what this did for their respective music. But all we read is that, “as we have seen from the vogue for the ‘Scotch song’, a taste for Scottish music was in the air” (p.47). This gave American music a “distinctly Celtic tinge”, which thus made it “easy for the Irish and American folk traditions to merge” (p.48). Isn’t this what is called a circular argument?

To look for the reasons underlying simultaneities in music cultures is of course a major task, requiring not just detective work but scientific analysis and contextual archival research, among other things. It may have just been too much – indeed given the vastness of van der Merwe’s chosen field one can almost forgive him for not having tried. So perhaps we just have to be content with somewhat unsatisfactory conclusions: “it seems likely that such a process was at work in American cities at the same time” (pp.48-49); “the Scotch-Irish style had the important characteristic of closely resembling African music in many respects” (p.47).

My interest was aroused again by the references to some kind of socio-political intervention (but remember, this is not a work of sociology): “The importance of these professional or semi-professional black musicians in the history of American popular music can hardly be exaggerated. Through them, African influences filtered into white folks’ music, and British tunes made their way to the less assimilated, still relatively African blacks” (p.64). But even in this fruitful terrain – which has not exactly been lacking in scholarly interest – van der Merwe’s ingenuousness strikes again: “It is unlikely, however, that African traditions would have survived so well if the existing black population had not deliberately clung to them. In other words, there was an element of black consciousness at work” (p.53).

These rather vague generalisations may frustrate one’s sense of inquiry, but they do succeed in provoking sharp questions in the mind of the reader. Perhaps it is no bad thing to raise more curiosity than you satisfy, as far as a general readership is concerned. More informed readers might well find the book interesting but frustrating, indeed, might well ask themselves why O.U.P. did not encourage extreme

caution and conciseness in the first part of the book, allowing the plentiful material of the second half to stand out unencumbered by the need to be contextualised or justified.

The 'Works Cited' on pp. 306 to 318 reflect his eclectic taste, but they are short on mainstream ethnomusicology or sociology of music.

Peter van der Merwe, like his namesake Peter Wimsey (whom he quotes in the Introduction), may be an 'amateur' sleuth, but what he uncovers is extensive and fascinating. Bear in mind that it is anecdotal in style and makes many large claims that are unsupported by evidence except of a circumstantial kind. Do not look for a well-developed argument about tradition and change or cultural transplantation (it is worth bearing in mind that the author's approach is quite strongly influenced by the writing of Alan Lomax).

Treat the book as a comparative study of melodic types, for example, and you can enjoy it as a piece of deconstructionist writing: Van der Merwe writing about melody in much the same way that deconstructionists write about 'intertext', when they claim that all works of literature are ultimately interconnected by their authors' or readers' recollections of other texts. In terms of *The Origins of the Popular Style* this would mean that all 'Atlantic' music is somehow related, the fringes of one style overlapping with or superimposed on another to create an endless 'intertext' of sound.

Whether or not you are interested in a theory such as this, or if you simply enjoy to be reminded again of all the wonderful old songs that you or your ancestors used to know, then you will certainly enjoy this book.

Christine Lucia, University of Durban-Westville

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