

## ***In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre***

by David B. Coplan

The first edition of this book was published by Longman (London and New York, 1985). A second and expanded edition was published by the University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 2008). This review of the first edition was written in 1986.

David B. Coplan's *In Township Tonight!* is well-researched, well-written, and well-recommended. On one level, it is the story of the development of modern black music in South Africa. On another level, it is a chronicle of black South African spirit responding to the continually unbelievable bigotry and exploitation of South African history. The book's narrative strategy involves cross-cutting Coplan's impressive documentation of key musical personalities and styles with elegantly synoptic passages describing the social history of the past hundred and fifty years. From the first paragraphs of the forward, where Coplan introduces the racial terminology with which people are classified in South Africa, we are reminded that we are entering a strange world, a modern nation state with attitudes and customs as strange as any to be found in anthropological literature. No matter how much one knows about South Africa, the systematic racialism that characterizes it is still shocking in its every petty and brutal aspect. Coplan's temperate prose is well-suited to its portrayal; all he needs to do is quote the facts — the demographic indicators, the political enactments, the newspaper editorials. Long before the formal institutionalization of apartheid, white South Africans thought about and did everything to oppress the lives of native and non-Western South African people. The ruling classes were not satisfied with total economic exploitation; they consciously sought to demoralize the human spirit.

It is in this latter regard that Coplan's book is a real eye-opener, because he has been able to use the history of black South African music to tell us much about the spirit of black South African people within these harsh conditions. It is amazing how complex are the details of the rigidifying process of this monolithic system, how enriching the personal histories of South African artists are when viewed against broad trends of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization. Coplan has done a remarkable job with archival resources, with interviews and with participant-observation research to produce a seamless overview of a diverse but unified musical tradition. On a general level, we can discern patterns that parallel the development and stylization of modern music in other African countries. Musical development presents a context for examining

processes of group identification and differentiation within the black community, and a wide spectrum of musical styles illuminates alternative attitudes towards social domains that were continually being redefined. Black South African musicians straddled the various available options as they pursued their music and lived their lives, and they were a vital link to the norms and values of traditional roots as well as the articulators of social meaning in changing circumstances of cross-cultural and inter-class contact and reorientation.

One point that distinguishes the South African situation from those documented in West Africa is that from the beginning, black South Africans' eyes were open about their exploitation, and they have been struggling to overcome the progressively oppressive system in many ways. Coplan uses music to chart many of their efforts and disappointments as they tried to assimilate, as they tried to defend themselves, as they tried to organize for collective action, as they tried to promote group consciousness. The song lyrics of the past seem oddly appropriate to contemporary international perspectives on South Africa. Music and the performing arts have played and will continue to play a strong supporting role in the ideological orientation of black South Africans. The importance of the role music has played in the lives of black South Africans is not to be minimized; it has helped them in many of the same ways that music helped black Americans during slavery. Music has helped black South Africans maintain a sense of themselves and a perspective on their situation, but Coplan's lengthy history of their music also affirms that they will need more than radicalization in their struggle. Moreover, the musical history Coplan provides is very important in terms of helping us understand the attitudes, creative abilities, adaptive strengths, generous humanism, and expressive energy of black South Africans so that we can know the type of people they are. In common with recent works about religion like Jean Comaroff's *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*, Coplan's book demonstrates the character and intentions of people who are difficult to see from those one-dimensional outsider's points of view that represent them essentially as a mass of victims who are acted upon. Coplan's portrait is also a historical document, a well-integrated study, that performs the valuable service of giving names to the individual pioneers of a significant tradition. The South Africans we meet in such works are complex people who augment that portrait as a welcome addition to the scholarship that has focused on other types of institutions.

*In Township Tonight!* is organized into seven substantive chapters, preceded by a brief introduction in which Coplan provides an overview of the book's direction and organization. The first substantive chapter describes

traditional musical resources and traces performance models that emerged during the nineteenth-century from a number of intercultural and external influences, including black American ones. The second chapter focuses on patterns of cultural and musical development against the backdrop of the growth of Johannesburg at the beginning of the twentieth century. The next two chapters examine processes of differentiation among black South Africans during the period between the world wars, first that of the dispossessed working-class and proletarian urbanites and second that of the educated elite pursuing its frustrated efforts to acculturate. Coplan maintains his sure hold on this complex history in the following chapter that discusses the urban culture of Sophiatown from 1940 to 1960. The final two substantive chapters portray the development of musical and dramatic arts during the past two decades in the context of more familiar aspects of South African political and social history. These substantive parts of Coplan's book are rich in detail, perhaps too meaty for some palates, but this reviewer personally found the examples fascinating. To those readers for whom the details are what give ethnographic accounts their interest, Coplan has delivered all they could ask; to those who prefer more generalized types of knowledge, Coplan never loses sight of broad patterns of modernization and the integrating role of the human dimensions of his material. The point is that the history he is telling is very complex indeed, that he has accepted the challenge, and that his scholarly and literary skills are more than up to the task.

The substantive part of *In Township Tonight!* is followed by a concise and thoughtful conclusion in which Coplan assesses the implications of his account of musical development with respect to historical issues of South African urbanization and to general anthropological perspectives on urbanization. The conclusion, coupled with the body of the book, make an eloquent argument for the relevance of ethnomusicological studies of musical and performing arts to general studies of social meaning and community formation. Coplan is at the cutting edge of scholarship in this regard. Cultural anthropologists have too often neglected the potential that musical institutions and elements of performance in social life have for helping us to understand and characterize the essential human dimensions of social forces and social movements. The elevated abstractions with which social organization is often discussed can be so removed from the specific lives of people in the research situation that generated those abstractions that our canons of scientific knowledge occasionally look pathetically irrelevant. The South African situation is one in which humanistic and political commitment are demanded of anyone who tries to deal with South African realities. As such, it

sets the stage for a type of scholarship that will be more and more evident, scholarship that refers itself to human goals as well as to its own scholastic genre. Coplan has documented an important aspect of South African history, important to the people who have been and are a part of it, important to the people who are witnessing it from a distance, important to the scholars who are trying to understand it. He has done his work with discipline and with compassion. I commend him and I recommend his book.