Popular music, folk music, African music: *King Kong* in South Africa and London

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how *King Kong: An African jazz opera* (1959), which was based on the life of a legendary boxer, challenged three modes of thinking about music that constituted its reception: popular, folk and African music. For black South Africans, *King Kong* was a staged spectacle of their everyday popular township jazz music. White South Africa’s widely covered reception of the production was unpredictable and varied, framed by the idea of “folk”. When *King Kong* opened in London in 1961, its music underwent different interpretations, framed by the idea of jazz as black music, and black music as African.

KEYWORDS: jazz; folk; African; apartheid; London.

INTRODUCTION
Mandlenkosi Ezekiel “King Kong” Dlamini ruled Sophiatown’s boxing legend as the undisputed “non-white” heavyweight icon during the first decade of apartheid. *King Kong: An African jazz opera* dramatizes the events that led to his death in 1957. It premiered in 1959 at the University of the Witwatersrand’s Great Hall in Johannesburg. *King Kong*’s scholars have repeatedly stressed that white critics’ and audiences’ responses, from all sides of South Africa’s political spectrum, fell within two interpretive frames: primitivism and naturalism (Kavanagh 1985; Kruger 1999; Titlestad 2004). Thus Michael Titlestad (2004, p. 104), for one, concludes his
analysis by acknowledging that King Kong’s reportage reduced the musical to a site across which debates about South African whiteness and postcolonial Englishness could be staged, although he homogenises these two forms of whiteness. While primitivism and naturalism were pervasive tropes in this reception, they are not equally productive when tracing how music was used to corroborate these claims. Assuming otherwise traps us into what Philip Bohlman and Ronald Radano (2000, p. 1) describe as a “commonplace opinion [that] what distinguishes the musically racial from the not-racial is as simple as telling the difference between black and white”. In this paper, I analyse how the tropes used to critique the play have more to do with how its music was identified: the styles to which it was perceived to belong and knowledge about these styles’ historical roles in the lives of its practitioners by those outside the observed musical culture. Examining how King Kong’s white creators viewed black musicking allows us to hone in on more than an evanescent discourse to which King Kong and its reception, in South Africa and in London, become but one example.

**Popular music, folk music: King Kong in South Africa**

King Kong occupied two sites in South Africa’s racialised imaginary. In black South Africa, firstly, its eclectic soundtrack transposed popular township music, most importantly African jazz/mbaqanga and its vocal variants. Marabi’s foundational influence as the first improvised pan-ethnic urban black musical performance style saw South African jazz bands from the 1930s onwards combine this musical inheritance with swing to create mbaqanga in the 1940s (Ballantine 1993). Todd Matshikiza, King Kong’s musical creator, was integral to this scene. King Kong’s use of kwela, a jazz-influenced style that was popular with whites and blacks, and with audiences outside South Africa (Allen 2005), repeats this commitment to township popular music.

The second (“white”) site imagined King Kong as an expression of folk-ideals. I am not arguing here that King Kong’s white creators viewed the music with which they were confronted as “folk music” in the narrow sense. Rather, I propose that they saw this music functioning in a particular manner that strongly resembles how folk music has been interpreted by others who consider their genres to have a folk function. For this, I focus on the white “King Kongers” who formed the musical’s production team: the scriptwriter Harry Bloom, the producer Leon Gluckman, and the musical director Stanley Glasser. I examine their relationships to black South African culture, and how these informed their perceptions of black jazzing practices.

According to Mona De Beer (1960, p. 11), King Kong’s documenter, Bloom envisioned King Kong as a series of vignettes strung together by a calypso-style singer with a guitar. The looseness of this initial conception underlines its debt to the traditions of black vaudeville, though it is also uncomfortably close to Alfred Herbert’s controversial African Jazz and Variety burlesques that had been staged since 1952. In the 1950s South Africa’s segregated public sphere ensured that while the black press – spearheaded by writers like Matshikiza – were cynical about Her-
bert, his shows were still popular with whites. Matshikiza’s distaste for Herbert-style burlesque surely led to this idea’s early dismissal. Musically, Herbert’s productions projected well-worn stereotypes of blackness onto musical practice by placing their emphasis on so-called “pounding rhythms” (Titlestad 2004, p. 83). Thus we note here a contradiction: pounding rhythm in South Africa’s marabi-derived subcultures was a relatively recent inclusion that signalled an affirmative Africanisation of musical expression and a significant political moment (see Ballantine 1993, pp. 60-61); Herbert turned them into musical markers of regressive primitivism, interpreted as “natural”.

The white King Kongers held rather different political ideologies to Alfred Herbert, so their resort to his profit-oriented innovations leads to our second contradiction. Bloom’s contribution to *King Kong* was shaped by his left-leaning political commitments and by an artistically mediated awareness of South Africa’s “race relations” worked out in his anti-apartheid novel, *Transvaal episode* (Bloom 1956). Leon Gluckman had extensive experience, first at the Old Vic and the Nottingham Playhouse and later with the vanguard of South African theatre’s adversarial tradition (notably Athol Fugard). Gluckman’s liberal humanist conviction in theatre’s humanising function predated *King Kong*. From *The Zionist Record* (Stein 1948) we learn that his strongest belief was that the only way to revive theatre in South Africa was to take it to the people living on the soil, to appeal to the Afrikaner’s natural bent for acting, to include the African by building their ritual into dance drama against an indigenous background (Stein, 23 July 1948). Gluckman’s statements reify and romanticise Afrikaners, they desire an inclusive theatrical tradition to express a broad nonracial South Africanism and they romantically emphasise African reliance on what he perceives as ritual; for him, both Africans and Afrikaners are imbued with folk-ideals that differ from Bloom’s emphasis on black urbanites as a proletariat (a different type of “folk”). Gluckman’s liberalism influenced the people he chose for *King Kong*, including the composer Stanley Glasser, who was engaged as the musical director in 1958 after studying music at King’s College, Cambridge. Between 1951 and 1955, Glasser spent some time with the ethnomusicologist Hugh Tracey at Msaho, the centre of the African Music Society. His fieldwork among the Pedi of the former northern Transvaal and the Xhosas of the former Transkei involved him in those broader musicological and anthropological trends concerned with “folk” in the 1950s. Glasser soon incorporated such musics into his early compositions. His appointment at the University of Cape Town’s music department allowed him to continue pursuing his “ever-present interest in the indigenous music of Africa” (De Beer 1960, p. 14). Like Gluckman, Stanley Glasser imagined a fully multi-racial South Africa as dependent and necessarily constitutive of indigenous South Africa.

When these creators were faced with *King Kong*, they had to reckon with the popular, which often undercut their folk-ideals. The extent of the unlearning required was considerable. Black city music by the 1950s was a mass industry in which black musicians wanted a larger stake; it did not subscribe to folk’s first ideal of non-commercialism and linkage with pre-capitalist modes of music production (Frith 1981). While Glasser’s early encounters with black musicking were
part of Tracey’s preservationist drive antipathetic to commercialized town music, Matshikiza’s music in *King Kong* was popular and urban, as Glasser soon recognised. The second folk-ideal, identified by Frith (ibid.), isolates certain musical features as aesthetic conventions. The white King Kongers also fell prey to this idea, going as far as stating that “music which is improvised becomes folk-music – an expression of the people” (De Beer 1960, p. 9), characteristically privileging spontaneity, a non-intellectual relationship to one’s music and artistic egalitarianism. While this might point to primitivist gesture, it is worth noting that it is arrived at by interpreting music in a certain way, rather than by the fact of blackness observed (see Bloom 1961, p. 11).

A third folk-ideal presumes folk music’s ability to express communal values as a political function. Bloom underwrites this in his foreword to the *King Kong* book. For him, black musicians “were at their best when singing of the simple things of their own world, or about events in the newspapers” (ibid., p. 8). Such songs did not form the bulk of 1950s musicians’ repertoire. Political relevance was often encrypted by using cosmopolitan or seemingly innocent styles (Allen 2003), rather than the directness folk connotes. The fourth folk-ideal involves “the people” to whom this music is meant to speak. The white King Kongers were aware of class stratification and differentiation in Johannesburg’s black society of the 1950s. Nevertheless, in *King Kong*, they insisted on the full coincidence of the musician-actors with the people they represented on stage, and interpreted this mimesis as the ultimate virtue of their project: their black cast was not subservient to the roles that they had created and merely had to illustrate the story “with their natural exuberance, and without the inhibitions imposed by acting roles” (Bloom 1961, pp. 15-16). A generous interpretation might see this desire to stress the staged as natural as a continuation of the dynamics of collaboration characteristic of the King Kong project. The problem is that this methodological compromise became an essentializing gesture. What began as a workshop of theatrical conventions became naturalised as a style, then an idiom and finally as intrinsic (see De Beer 1960, p. 33).

What the white King Kongers failed to realise is that the non-distinction they perceived between their cast and the black world they represented on stage was a structurally constituted similarity: being black in apartheid South Africa. The black actors could assume and exchange roles within this structure – they lived out the contours and determinants of the structure on stage, rather than their lives. This is why Bloom’s and De Beer’s statements cannot square with Gluckman’s reported address to his cast on the first day of rehearsal: “Tradition (acting is alien to most of you)” (in De Beer 1960, p. 31). These contradictions show that although they were different as people and as artists, the white King Kongers encountered black popular music in ways that were structurally organised around certain folk-ideals, of which Herbert’s burlesques differed more by degree than kind: in *King Kong* the boxer became a folk hero, the variegated black urban population assumed the coherence of a folk community, while popular music disseminated by a powerful recording industry was awarded the virtues of folk music.
JAZZ AS AFRICAN MUSIC: KING KONG IN LONDON

When *King Kong* opened in London’s Princes Theatre in 1961, it did so as *King Kong: All-African musical*. Its musical changes were extensive, although this was often underplayed: the orchestra was expanded and the arrangements bore more resemblance to standard dance band formats and American swing. South African writers who favoured Africanising influences in *mbaqanga* bemoaned the new arrangements as inauthentic (Ansell 2004, p. 223), while others argued that inclusions of neo-traditional styles like the gumboot dance and the “all-African musical” appellation undermined *King Kong*’s modernising (jazz) features.

London audiences also expressed their suspicion of the musical’s authenticity in terms of loss or absence of African features, but their frames of reference differed. *King Kong* entered the British jazz scene at a time when debates about what constituted “true jazz” were peaking. British reviews of *King Kong*’s music are framed by the modernist trope of hot rhythm as black music’s “vital essence”, whose conflation of musical and racial discourses aimed to “project an illusory folk authenticity” (Radano 2000, pp. 459, 462). If we bear in mind the time-lag of jazz’s presence in the United Kingdom, and the arrival of *King Kong* as an all-African musical whose soundscape was *African* jazz, then the focus on “hot rhythm” is predictable: *King Kong* came from, meant to represent, the “source”.

Stumbling onto the notion of “folk” and its uses in *King Kong* illuminates surprising consensus on theatre and music performed by blacks in 1950s South Africa, and on transnational myths of “the folk” as “a temporal concept of descent” (ibid., p. 460). However, *King Kong*’s reception in London also exposes the tensions of postcolonial Englishness. With South Africa no longer one of its marvellous possessions, older codes of colonial England were easily displaced as problems of “race relations” peculiar to South Africa, even while *King Kong*’s reviews easily segued into discussing “the immigration problem” inside the gates (*Daily Mail*, 1961).

CONCLUSION: APARTHEID’S FOLK

When South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961, South Africa House’s propaganda rationalized *King Kongers* as exemplars of “Bantu folk ability to interpret the world in their own way”, praising their “flair for enjoying themselves on stage and spreading that joy” in “[their] own music, [their] own language, and [their] own dancing” (*Yorkshire Post* 1961). But apartheid’s appropriation of folk-ideals points to more than their inability to read South African jazz beyond primitivism and naturalism. The failure to hold South Africa to account for the 1960 Sharpeville massacre is manifest in the silence around the human violation *King Kong* places on stage, displaced but not silenced by ringing reviews of vitality and jollity. This would change as anti-apartheid agitation demanded more committed engagement, but South African jazz would remain trapped by the demands of folk expression that, ironically, would be fulfilled by conservative productions like *Ipi tombi*; not by other South African jazz musicians in London, who had different battles to wage.
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ENDNOTES

1. The following argument is more than a little influenced by Simon Frith’s (1981) examination of how ideas that informed interpretations of folk music influenced the myth of the rock community. I am also aware that the use of “folk” in South Africa has its own historical trajectory.

2. Transvaal episode (Bloom 1956) won the British Authors Club First Novel Award in May 1957. Originally titled Episode, it was published by Collins (UK) in 1956, also appearing in South Africa in this year, where it was labeled “undesirable”. In 1981 it was one of six books chosen by Second Chance Press (US) and, a year later was resurrected in South Africa by David Philip’s Africa South Paperbacks imprint as Transvaal episode (1982).

3. In Cape Town, Glasser was also more interested in urban popular themes. In 1961, he composed a ballet called The square – a depiction of gang life in Cape Town’s District Six and in 1962 he collaborated with Chris McGregor in the musical Mr Paljas (McGregor 1995, p. 22).

4. 1950 inaugurated what Jim Godbolt (1989) has termed “Britain’s First Real Jazz Age”. It saw significant changes in the British jazz scene, with big bands collapsing, styles dividing into “trad”, “bop” and “mainstream” and jazz becoming increasingly professionalised, spurred by post-war Britain’s infatuation with all things American.

5. These are contained in the Jack Hylton Archives, University of Lancaster, England.

REFERENCES


