Beyond Memory

Mojapelo, Max

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FOREWORD

South Africa possesses one of the richest popular music traditions in the world, surpassed in its variety and inventiveness perhaps only by the United States. From marabi to mbaqanga, from boeremusiek to bubblegum, from kwela to kwainto: as varied as are the many peoples of South Africa in origin, culture and pigmentation, so dizzy is the array of popular music styles and genres that one encounters here. Yet the risk that future generations of South Africans will not know their musical roots is very real. Of all the recordings made here since the 1930s, thousands have been lost for ever, for the powers-that-be never deemed them worthy of preservation. And if one peruses the books that exist on South African popular music, one still finds, despite their wealth of scholarship, that there are misspelt names and inaccurate dates, and that their authors have on occasion jumped to conclusions that were not as foregone as they had assumed. Yet the fault lies not with them, rather in the fact that there has been precious little documentation in South Africa of who played what, or who recorded what, with whom, and when. This is true of all music-making in this country, though it is most striking in the musics of the black communities. Part of the reason, at least, is obvious: apartheid-era Bantu Education was a means of mass subjugation intended not only to deny our black fellow citizens a future, but also, through withholding access to higher learning, to prevent them from recording their past. The goal, albeit unstated, was to ensure that the impossibility of a future and the absence of a past would resign the masses to an unquestioning acceptance of an immutable present of servitude. With few exceptions – such as the moving, but all-too-brief autobiography of the brilliant Todd Matshikiza (his Chocolates for my Wife, now almost fifty years old) – the little that was committed to paper about black music was done so by whites who, however liberal, well-meaning and empathetic, were by virtue of their colour on the privileged side of the great divide that apartheid was constantly endeavouring to render unbridgeable.

The present book is invaluable to all of us, in South Africa and beyond, because it offers a first-hand account of the South African music scene of the past decades from the pen of a man, Max Thamagana Mojapelo, who was situated in the very thick of things, thanks to his job as a deejay at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). This book is based on his diaries, on interviews he conducted and on numerous other sources, and we find in it not only the well-known names of recent South African music – from Hugh
Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa or Johnny Clegg to Brenda Fassie – but a countless host of others whose contribution must be recorded if we and future generations are to gain an accurate picture of South African music history of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The breadth of coverage here is astonishing, and this book also serves as eloquent testimony to the fact that music is a prime instrument of breaking down those artificial barriers that the previous regime had erected. For the musicians of whom we read here are black, white, coloured, Indian, classical, jazz, pop, crossover, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu – indeed, there could hardly be a better picture painted of the South Africa we would all like most to see, in which men and women are united for a common purpose, irrespective of what any politicians of the past (or present) might claim divides them. But music is not just a great leveller: above all, it uplifts. We, the readers, are left here above all with a sense of Mojapelo’s joy in music and of his enthusiasm and deep empathy for his fellow human beings; and this, in turn, uplifts us too.

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