

SUZEL ANA REILY (ED.), *THE MUSICAL HUMAN: RETHINKING JOHN BLACKING'S ETHNOMUSICOLOGY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), ISBN: 0-7546-5138-X, 234 pp, £47.50/\$94.95.

Taking various perspectives on Blacking's work—from those who met him to those who did not, from those whose careers have been influenced by interaction with the charismatic man, to those who know only his writings—*The Musical Human's* greatest strength, to my mind, lies in how Blacking's theories and concepts are interrogated and interpreted in light of the contributors' individual areas of expertise. In addition, the volume provides a reasonably diverse perspective on ethnomusicology as a whole, and explores some of the central concerns of the field.

Reily's thorough and confident introduction offers a portrait of the charismatic man 'proclaiming his vision', the scholar seeking to integrate the theoretical and methodological issues in ethnomusicology, and the meticulous ethnographer. After a brief biographical sketch of Blacking and his career, Reily moves to a consideration of Blacking's representations of the Venda. Given that Reily arguably knows Blacking's ethnographic material on the Venda girls' initiation schools better than most,¹ this is a detailed and critical assessment of how Blacking represented the Venda. Here Reily presents some of Blacking's less than idyllic encounters with the Venda, balancing his more widely publicized representation of them as a virtually ideal cultural group, and pointing to some possible reasons for his downplaying internal strife. But her article is more than an exposition of some of Blacking's theories; it is also a plea to ethnomusicology to continue to promote his messianic view of the power of music. Thus, she concludes, 'may we not forget his message to the twenty-first century: music contributes to making us human, and therein lies its power to make a difference' (15).

Keith Howard's chapter is devoted to an examination of Blacking's fieldwork and how he drew on his initial twenty months amongst the Venda as a grounding for most of his subsequent theorizing. While this may have irritated some—David Josephson is cited as evaluating it as 'unacceptably Vendacentric'² and, as Britta Sweers later reminds us, Joseph Kerman remarked irately in his *Contemplating Music* that 'we need...waste little time with Blacking's rather portentous claim that only after understanding Venda music of the Transvaal has he been able to understand Western

¹ See the website *Venda Girls' Initiation Schools* (1998) produced by Suzel Reily and Lev Weinstock: http://www.era.anthropology.ac.uk/Era_Resources/Era/VendaGirls/Introduction/TitlePage.html

² David Josephson, review of John Blacking's *A Commonsense View of all Music*, in *Ethnomusicology* 35:2 (1991), 263–8: 268.

music properly³—Howard provides various defences of Blacking’s methods, including four defences that Blacking himself offered in an interview with Howard in 1989.⁴ As a former student of Blacking’s, Howard also offers some personal commentary on Blacking the teacher.

Jaco Kruger’s chapter on Venda guitar songs provides a contemporary foil to Blacking’s 1956–7 fieldwork. Kruger engages upon a detailed analysis of *muzika wa sialala* (‘modern old music’ or ‘contemporary song that articulates social themes...or critically evaluates contemporary social experience against the template of pre-colonial forms of morality’(43)), that includes examination of song lyrics and the values extolled therein; a consideration of Blacking’s view of older African music as shifting tonality and the applicability of that to this new genre; musical transcriptions and reductions; and photographs of the musicians. Kruger’s conclusion broadens out nicely from this detailed musical analysis, reminding us that music must be interpreted contextually, that older or superficially similar forms may be reinterpreted on the local level to encode different meanings, echoing Blacking’s famous distinction between deep and surface structures.⁵

Opening with a brief exposé of how, as an undergraduate at Witwatersrand University’s Anthropology Department (which Blacking had left some years previously), she discovered his Venda material, Deborah James explains how Blacking’s writings pointed her in the direction of her future research. The debt to Blacking is, of course, also acknowledged in her title ‘Black Background’ which echoes that of Blacking’s 1964 book.⁶ While James is, like Blacking, interested in ‘the role played by music in socializing children, and young women in particular’, her perspective is more retrospective than Blacking’s, seeking ‘to investigate how adult women saw the music of their childhood in retrospect, and to try to understand how it had shaped, or been shaped to form, their later musical experiences’ (71). Focusing her discussion on the *kiba* dance—a genre that was traditionally male, but that is now performed by migrant women workers—in contemporary (1990s) Vendaland, James explores how the musical experiences of childhood and adolescence gave these

³ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 167.

⁴ Keith Howard, ‘John Blacking: an Interview’, *Ethnomusicology* 35:1 (1991), 55–76: 70.

⁵ John Blacking, ‘Deep and Surface Structures in Venda Music’, *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 3 (1971), 91–108.

⁶ John Blacking, *Black Background: the Childhood of a South African Girl* (London and New York: Abelard Schuman, 1964).

migrant women workers a means of ‘affirming customary connections’ and also gave ‘those aspiring to a modern life a way of entrenching and fortifying their commitment to civilization’ (84). This is a personal and thoughtful chapter that seeks to integrate Blacking’s work on Venda girls’ ritual and music, and some of the theories he developed from that, with contemporary ethnography in a somewhat similar vein.

In chapter 5, Fumiko Fujita presents a study of musicality in early childhood (essentially the toddler years, although in the first year of the three-year study children as young as three months were included), drawing on material gathered from a nursery school in Tokyo. While Fujita stresses that this is a preliminary study, her detailed data illustrate how the development of musical competence in Japanese toddlers is closely connected to the development of speech competence. Taking as a point of departure Blacking’s assertion that all human beings are capable of making music (in Blacking’s case, illustrated, of course, by his encounter with the Venda⁷), Fujita concludes from her study that ‘all normal Japanese children are musical’ (105), and that they develop their musical competence in ways that challenge many of the assumptions of programmes of music education.

In chapter 6 John Baily revisits research that he undertook with John Blacking in the 1970s, bringing together his own background in experimental psychology with Blacking’s ideas about how musical structure is shaped by the interaction between the morphology of the musical instrument and the physicality of the human body. Baily grounds his discussion in detailed consideration of two Afghani plucked lutes—the *rubab* and the *dutar*—initially relying heavily on learning to perform on these two instruments as a means of conducting research. From this research Baily and Blacking uncovered ‘some of the ways in which the interaction between human body and instrument is connected with the structure of the music produced’ (121). While stressing that Blacking well understood that the interaction between body and instrument is but one aspect of a thorough exploration of musical sound, Baily concludes with an appeal for more ethnomusicologists to develop the area of cognitive ethnomusicology, which he sees as a potentially very fruitful area of study.

Continuing the theme of the body’s interaction with music, Helena Wulff offers a fascinating personal view into the world of ballet and dance (as Blacking compared

⁷ This theory is explored most effectively, perhaps, in Blacking’s famous publication, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973).

Venda dances with European ballet⁸). Taking as her point of departure Blacking's assertion that dance achieves an ideal unity between body and mind, Wulff argues that this integration of body and mind in dance takes place 'in a number of shifting and complex ways' (126). Integrating her discussion with Foucault's ideas about the power of discipline for moulding bodies,⁹ she argues convincingly that the 'transcendental states of flow' (138) that the dancer experiences when fully in the dance, so that dancing seems effortless, result from previous experiences of pain necessary to the acquisition of the mastery of technique. Wulff's central point is that although states of flow may occur in very different cultural contexts—Venda dance and European ballet—the transcendent experience seems to be quite similar, uniting the Venda body and the ballet body 'in a shared experience of humanity across time and geographical distance' (140).

Further exploring the idea of transcendence—in this case in relation to her experience of conducting research into Haitian Vodou songs—Rebecca Sager examines Blacking's notion of the 'other self'. Beginning with an examination of this concept in Blacking's theory, Sager concludes that, for Blacking, the 'other self' was 'the memory or prospect of self in the experience of transcendence' (150). She then proceeds to explore her own concept of the 'other-self within' as expressed during moments of transcendence in Vodou music and ritual context, proposing that the 'other-self within' is a 'manifestation of the highest values imaginable by the person being possessed' (153). For Sager, Blacking's exploration of the 'other self' encountered in moments of (especially musical) transcendence, 'transformed the landscape of identity theory' (168) and integrated the individual into his concept of common humanity.

The final paper in this volume, Britta Sweers' 'Bach in a Venda Mirror', returns to the long-lived debate concerning how ethnomusicology and historical musicology interact, examining points of intersection between the two disciplines. Echoing the 'other self' discussion of the previous chapter, Sweers suggests that links between ethnomusicology and historical musicology might fruitfully be explored through the area of Early Music, an area of investigation that has long been concerned with the 'historical other' most particularly in relation to performance practice. Not surprisingly, Sweers concludes that ethnomusicology can provide 'an extremely enriching complement to historical musicology' (191), given its strength in the study of

⁸ See, for example, Blacking's contribution to the collection edited by Paul Spencer, *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

the musical other. Along with Blacking she perceives the study of the musical other as valuable not only in its own right, but also for the perspective that it gives us to reflect back on our own musical culture. This, she concludes, is 'the reason why Blacking's research on the Venda is so important for Western music studies' (191).

In sum, this is a valuable volume that brings John Blacking once again to the forefront of ethnomusicology, this time in the twenty-first century. The individual chapters are well written and coherently argued, and Reily has grouped them in ways that seamlessly carry particular themes and theories in Blacking's work across a broad range of theoretical and ethnographic interests.

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