

## Review

***Playing the Changes. Jazz at an African University and on the Road.* By Darius Brubeck and Catherine Brubeck. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2023. 321 pp. ISBN 978 186914 528 6  
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In the world of popular music, memoirs of musicians are a crucial component of the industry that depends as much on a steady output of global ‘hits’ as on producing narratives about the ‘true’ lives of the stars performing them. South Africa is no exception to this. Over the past several decades, some of the country’s most revered and internationally recognised figures such as Miriam Makeba (Makeba and Hall 1988), Hugh Masekela (Masekela and Cheers 2004), Joe Mogotsi (Mogotsi *et al.* 2002), Todd Matshikiza (Matshikiza 1961), Johnny Clegg (Clegg 2021), and Sathima Benjamin (Muller and Benjamin 2011) have all produced life stories of one kind or another.

It would be misleading, however, to attach the label ‘autobiography’ to these works. Apart from Matshikiza, who looked back on a long and distinguished career as journalist for the legendary *Drum* magazine, before embarking on writing his memoir *Chocolates for My Wife* while in exile, all of them in fact result from close collaborations with seasoned journalists, academics of various stripes, and in the case of Mogotsi, his spouse.

Lindelwa Dalamba has subjected some of these texts to critical scrutiny, arguing that what is encountered in them ‘is not so much a narrated past but storying’. Instead of representing a true self, autobiographic writing is a ‘storying device, which seeks unilaterally to (re)present and position the subject in a particular chronotope and plot, and offers this as the only significant subject position’ (Dalamba 2008, p. 56). Hence, the self that these ‘autobiographies’ narrate is not an authentic person but the result of a simulation or what she calls, following Pierre Bourdieu, a ‘biographical illusion’ (Bourdieu 2000). Indeed, there are two types of biographical illusion: one that scripts the autobiography ‘as unmediated truthful utterances that retell the musicians’ lives from direct experience and memory’, and another in which ‘the musicians encounter their lives as an already finished script’ (Dalamba 2008, p. 57). Together, these illusions naturalise and mythologise the historical figure while at the same time authenticating and making them to stand for the national biography.

*Playing the Changes* is a chronicle of the extraordinarily rich lives lived by Darius and Catherine Brubeck in South Africa from 1983 to 2006 while Darius founded and led the first study programme in jazz at what was the recently established and highly innovative music department at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa and, indeed, on the entire African continent. Although on the face of it just another autobiography in the Masekela or Mogotsi mode, as the latest addition to the list of South African musician autobiographies *Playing the Changes* is in fact difficult to square with Dalamba’s verdict. For instance, other than Johnny Clegg, the above-mentioned musicians were all Black and were forced into exile during the

Apartheid era. In contrast, the Brubecks, like Clegg, are not only white but they also chose to live in South Africa during the final years of Apartheid. For Darius, as an American and the son of jazz giant Dave Brubeck, the decision to take up the position of jazz lecturer at the University of Natal, in the middle of a sea of utter bigotry, was a deep plunge. Meanwhile Cathy, as she called herself, grew up in South Africa and moved back there after a long career as an administrator, fund-raiser and manager of some jazz greats in the US and elsewhere.

A second difference from the 'autobiographies' mentioned above is due in large part to Cathy's prior experience, as the lives of the two authors have been intertwined in ways that, in terms of both duration and depth, are only possibly matched by those of Mogotsi and his wife. Unsurprisingly, Cathy's contribution to the book by far exceeds the mostly peripheral, invisible roles played by the 'co-authors' of the other texts. This fact shapes the form and broader thrust of the narrative. In each chapter, Darius and Cathy take turns in highlighting one or the other aspect of the events or characters under discussion, thereby subverting the illusion of a (predominantly male) soliloquy.

Finally, while the work is clearly informed by the 'national biography', it is certainly not dominated by it. In fact, half of this book appears to have been written with the aim of overwriting that biography itself – at least the white part of it and occasionally also the 'struggle' episodes. A very different layer foregrounds both the pleasures and ups-and-downs of jazz life, and shows potential as a jazz pedagogy to forge a positive, pragmatic and inclusive vision of South Africa.

The overall tone is conversational yet thoughtful and informative. True to the spirit of jazz improvisation, some names of people and places seemingly pop up out of nowhere without further introduction, only to resurface several pages later. That may at times come across as disorienting, but the underlying chord progression is always clear and present. To this reviewer, the greatest merit of *Playing the Changes*, however, is twofold. It features many musicians who hardly ever received any recognition during the Apartheid era and who, one fears, may be forgotten were it not for the Brubecks and their book. In that sense, the book is also a valuable contribution to the broader effort of the past 30 or so years of building a South African cultural archive.

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