

# Editorial Note

## Remembering – John Blacking

John Blacking was the most extraordinary man. In a letter written to the Editorial Group of *Popular Music* on 3 November 1990, just two and a half months before his death on 24 January, he described himself as ‘unreasonably optimistic about achieving remission, if not cure’ from his illness ‘though it is rare in pancreatic cancer and certainly hasn’t happened yet!’ The group had written sending their good wishes to him – and expressing their thanks for the active role he had played in the establishment of the Journal. John had been an active member of the original advisory group, attending meetings full of enthusiastic support, practical suggestions and ideas. In this last letter to us he wrote,

I hope I shall be able to continue to be of some use to *Popular Music* and that you will not hesitate to call on me from time to time. I was very touched to hear that some of my ideas about music have been helpful. During the next few months I hope to get some more thoughts and data down on paper, and especially something on what we learn about socialism from pre-feudal and pre-industrial societies. I find the general shift to the right, even in East Europe very depressing, especially as we have much more evidence that socialism is right and ‘natural’, and the logical destiny of mankind, and that the artistic forms of communication are crucial in its management and maintenance.

It may seem odd to begin a memory of a man whose work was so essentially to Ethnomusicology and the Anthropology of Music not only in Great Britain (he once told me that he disliked the use of UK as this did not embrace Northern Ireland) with a private quote revealing his underlying political beliefs and hopes – but it seems to me that this brief letter reveals the essential John Blacking. Firstly, the eternal optimist whose positive and challenging approach to everything imbued not only his own life but spilled over to charge one’s own. And secondly, the essential democracy which was a fundamental part not only of his beliefs but of his nature and character.

His spectacular fight against cancer was typical of a man who had led a spectacular, almost evangelical fight to get the interdisciplinary study of Ethnomusicology fully recognised in this country amongst diverse disciplines, institutions, organisations and associations both academic and lay. As Professor of Social Anthropology at the Queen’s University, Belfast, John developed the first post-graduate programme in Ethnomusicology in Europe. His reputation and personality attracted advanced students from all over the world, including of course South Africa; a group who created an impressive body of doctoral and post-doctoral research in music and dance of the world. Well over fifty post-graduates gained their Ph.D.s in Social Anthropology (Ethnomusicology). And no one has made a count of students elsewhere who persisted and achieved with his encouragement. His was a remarkable department. He managed to persuade authorities

to allow a liberal admissions policy so that qualifications from little known institutions around the world were recognised and respected. He made allies of the right people – such as the British Council in Belfast who provided many scholarships. The students who came brought with them the expertise of their own languages and culture which John integrated and used to enrich the life of a department which was characterised by the practise of dialogue and exchange. Always proud of everyone's achievements John was ever ready to quote and cite his students work and to learn from them.

His tenacity and infectious enthusiasm was rooted in an anglo-catholic childhood. Born on 22 October 1928, the oldest of three children, and the only son, John attended Sherbourne School and then went on to do military service, commissioned into the Coldstream Guards after winning the Belt of Honour at OCTU (Officer Corps Training Unit). According to Adam Kuper, it was while John was in Malaya, leading a platoon of irregulars drawn from the Aboriginal population that he decided to study anthropology. In 1949 he went to Cambridge to study with Meyer Fortes. After graduation he returned briefly to Malaya as Assistant Advisor on aborigines but was dismissed by General Templer for refusing to participate in the forced removal of forest people. He went to Paris and studied the Anthropology of Music with Andre Schaffner at the Musee de L'Homme and from there moved to South Africa in 1954 to the International Library of African Music where he carried out his first field studies in Mozambique and Zululand before his study of the Venda of the Sibasa District of the Northern Transvaal (Kuper 1990).

John was one of the first people to bring the traditions of Malinowskian anthropology to such musical research. From the beginning his work was unusual in its stress on the context and process of performance. John's *Venda Children's Songs: a Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis* (1967) effectively initiated the modern anthropological study of music (Kuper 1990). In 1959 he became Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Witwatersrand and in 1965 was appointed Professor and Head of Department. He challenged government policies not only in his professional but in his private life. His love for Zureena Desai led him to fall foul of the 'Immorality Act'. Following prosecution he and Zureena left South Africa.

John's academic honesty and directness was also deeply unusual for the time. In the Preface to his seminal *How Musical is Man?* he wrote of how during his first year of fieldwork he tended to regard African music as something 'other'; and how this attitude was reinforced when he listened to a tape of *Wozzeck* or some of Webern's music in his tent, or whenever there was a piano available and he immersed himself in Bach, or Chopin, or Mozart:

It was the Venda of South Africa who first broke down some of my prejudices. They introduced me to a new world of musical experience and to a deep understanding of 'my own' music. I had been brought up to understand music as a system of ordering sound, in which a cumulative set of rules and an increasing range of permissible sound patterns had been invented and developed by Europeans who were considered to have exceptional music ability. By associating different 'sonic objects' with various personal experiences, by hearing and playing repeatedly the music of certain approved composers, and by selective reinforcement that was supposed to be objectively aesthetic but was not unrelated to class interests, I acquired a repertoire of performing and composing techniques and musical values that were as predictably a consequence of my social and cultural environment as are the musical abilities and taste of a Venda man a convention of his society. The chief results of nearly two years fieldwork among the Venda and of attempts to analyze my data over a period of twelve years are that I think I am beginning to understand the Venda system; I no longer understand the history and structures of European "art" music as clearly as I did; and I can

see no useful distinction between the terms 'folk' and 'art' music except as commercial labels. (Blacking 1976, pp. v–vi)

John stressed that he learnt from the Venda that no music can be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people and that 'distinctions between the surface complexity of different musical styles and techniques do not tell us anything useful about the expressive purposes and power of music or about the intellectual organisation involved in its creation' (*ibid.* p. vi). From the beginning he was concerned with the process of music making, continually laying emphasis on the physicality of this process,

Many if not all of music's essential processes can be found in the constitution of the human body in patterns of interaction of human bodies in society. The makers of art music are not innately more sensitive or clever than 'folk' musicians: the structures of their music simply express, by processes similar to those in Venda music, the numerically larger systems of interaction of folk in their societies, the consequences of a more extensive division of labor, and an accumulated technological tradition. (*ibid.* pp. vi–vii)

John's contribution to the field of popular music was as an ethnomusicologist and a musician. He wished to restore musical consciousness and practice to their central point in human life. Elitist attitudes to music and music making were anathema to him. In the first article he wrote for *Popular Music* he argued his interest in popular music as a category of value – regarding music making as an essential qualification of becoming fully human, 'so that failure to practice it means some innate capabilities and resources untapped' (Blacking 1981, p. 13).

John often quoted Susanne Langer, 'music can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach' (Langer 1948). He was convinced that an anthropological approach to the study of all musical systems makes more sense of them than analyses of the patterns of sound as things in themselves. He felt music making as a defining feature of humanity, on a par with ritual expression and language. Early on he stressed that if his guesses were correct about the biological and social origins of music it would generate new ideas about the role of music in education, and its general role in societies. John felt that music was an intrinsic part of the development of mind, body and harmonious social relationships: 'These ideas are of course older than the writings of Boethius and Plato on music; but I hope that my own experiences may add a fresh perspective to a perennial problem' (Blacking 1976, p. viii).

For his early series of lectures in memory of John Danz delivered at the University of Washington which became the seminal *How Musical is Man?* he used extracts of Britten's *War Requiem* and Mahler's Ninth and Tenth Symphonies and *Song of the Earth* alongside his Venda music. When I first laid hands on this book I was amazed at its clarity, brevity and pace. Meeting the man one encountered the same qualities in conversation – he would listen, his own contributions even when talking of great complexities were most often incisive and always open. Indeed this reminds me of some advice he once gave me on how to deal with other people, particularly when you had something you wished to achieve when they might have influence: 'Keep your powder dry – wait for the right moment to use it!' he said.

John was an exciting person to know, open to the ideas and opinions of others. And he loved a good debate, to throw down an intellectual challenge, ready to argue his position. I was privileged enough to have him as the external

examiner for my Ph.D. during which he taxed me in hard argument concerning my use of Victor Turner's concept of *rite de passage* in my analysis of musical performance. I remember the experience of the viva voce as a sword fight! And in a sense as we both conceded points I felt deeply my debt to him – for my own resolution owed something to his own example gleaned from erratic but impressive contact I had had with him over the years at conferences. And I recognised him as one of those rare people one can be lucky to meet in one's life, who engages with anyone from two years old to a hundred with the same sense of equal interest, respect and integrity.

John was a warm and generous man who naturally moved to the heart of the many groups and committees he became part of, able to lead while remaining sensitive to the positions and opinions of others. He was powerful but used his power constantly to help others. He founded the European Seminar on Ethnomusicology and used it as a vehicle to assist colleagues in Eastern Europe. Closer to home he was an enthusiastic source of advice and ideas on how to get money for further research and projects, tactfully using his own influence whenever he could. It is for this reason that he had so many friends amongst his colleagues, why so many colleagues and students who had erratic contact with him felt close to him, why so many people from far across the world were drawn to Belfast to work with him, why just so many people liked him. As a supervisor he was a catalyst, listening, commenting, suggesting, reinforcing the sense of the worth of one's own work and the confidence to carry it through.

From 1981 to 1983 he was President of the Society for Ethnomusicology (USA), the only person not resident in North America to be elected to this office. He became General Editor of the Cambridge University Press Series in Ethnomusicology. He was active in the National Council for Academic Awards, especially in the field of dance education. He scripted and introduced the television series *Dancing*. He spent semesters as a visiting fellow in Universities of Pittsburgh and Berkeley and the University of Western Australia where he wrote much of his last book *A Commonsense View of Music*. He was invited to give many distinguished lectures; was elected a Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1984; was awarded the Rivers Memorial Medal in 1986; and received the Koizumi Fumio prize in Tokyo in 1989 (Baily 1990).

John was also a family man who liked to spend time at home, to cut the grass and play the piano. When I rang him once to ask if he would mind if I attended a week of seminars he had organised in Belfast on Javanese and Balinese gamelan music with Mantle Hood, with my youngest child in a carry-cot, he joyfully told me how he had brought his own babies into lectures in a carry-cot, how it would be good for my daughter to be around the music and chat that week – she could imbibe the beauty of the music and some understanding of it with her mother's milk!

That John is missed is an understatement. We have lost one of the greatest ethnomusicologists and educators of the century. But his legacy lies in the enormous number of people from all parts of the world who are all the more for having come into contact with him and to whom he passed on his spirit and his belief in the serious study of popular music.

In this issue of *Popular Music* dedicated to John Blacking's memory we have five 'Reminiscences' of John from people who worked closely with him: Jorge de Carvalho who with his wife Rita, came from Brazil, South America to do their

Ph.D.s under John's supervision; John Baily, who was a post-doctoral research fellow at Queen's University, Belfast between 1973 and 1978 and Lecturer in Ethnomusicology there from 1978 to 1984; Andrée Grau who first came into contact with John in 1975 through the work of the Benesh Institute, going on to work closely with him in the anthropology of Venda dance; Peter Cooke who first met John in 1964 in East Africa and whose encounter with Blacking contributed greatly (like that of Grau and many others) to his life changing direction; and Ruth Finnegan, a colleague from the Open University. Each of these people contribute anecdotes and memories which capture something of the man.

Certain things John liked to say are oft repeated (Blacking 1976, p. 13): for example his favourite aphorism from Eric Gill 'it isn't that artists are special kinds of people. It's that people are special kinds of artists.' He found this echoed in Marx: 'There will be no more painters but only men and women who also paint.' From his beloved Venda, his 'musical people' he took their proverbs 'Man is man because of his association with other men', and 'The home of the coward is without regrets' – which he used to support his vision of soundly organised humanity (Baily 1990).

In the issue itself appropriately we have three articles on the music of South Africa, two of which were originally presented at a seminar on South African Music in which John took part. The Editors would like to thank Advisory Editor Veit Erlman, who co-ordinated the seminar, for his help in obtaining and preparing these three articles. First Christopher Ballantine writes on '“Concert and Dance”: The Foundation of Black Jazz in South Africa Between the Twenties and the Early Forties'. In 'The Constant Companion of Man: Separate Development, Radio Bantu and Music', Charles Hamm analyses the structural organisation and programme content of the South African Broadcasting system 'SABC' during the three decades after the National party came to power, to suggest how the South African state used radio and radio music as part of a highly successful strategy to entrench its policies of apartheid. In 'Popular Indian South African Music: Division in Diversity', Melveen Jackson provides an overview of the total range of popular music as it is experienced by Indian South Africans.

The other two articles which complete the issue are 'The Cassette Industry and Popular Music in North India' by Peter Manuel, and Martin Parker's 'Reading the Charts – Making Sense with the Hit Parade'. Because of the Blacking Reminiscences this issue has no Middle Eight section but it will return for the next one.

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## References

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