

Meintjes, Louise. 2003. *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 335 pp.

Brett Pyper

In the early 1990s, when Louise Meintjes conducted the bulk of the research on which *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* is based, Zulu ethnicity was being celebrated on the world's stages at the same time that it was being bitterly contested at home. In the wake of Paul Simon's *Graceland* collaborations, accomplished studio musicians and ethnically identified groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo gained access to the burgeoning world music market. At the same time, however, a violent upsurge of Zulu ethnic nationalism threatened the negotiated transition from white minority rule to nonracial democratic elections. This violence, which jeopardized the transition process from Nelson Mandela's release in 1990 until the eve of South Africa's historic 1994 elections, was a manifestation of the apartheid state's reification and manipulation of African ethnicity as a divide-and-rule strategy.

Inevitably registering these powerful countervailing processes, Meintjes' study proceeds from three broad theoretical coordinates: first, that control over black expressive cultural production and ethnic identities has been a crucial feature of South African sociopolitical contestation; second, that musical styles can be interpreted as signs and are subject to manipulation in the interests of social groups; and third, that style derives its meaning and affective power primarily through its association with the sociopolitical positioning and social values of music participants and through the sensuous experience of those who encounter it (9–11). Though such principles have been well established in anthropology, performance studies, and cultural studies, by tracing them through to the level of sonic experience and affect, and by showing precisely how musical style and sound are themselves sites of hegemonic contestation, Meintjes' study makes a significant contribution to contemporary research on South African music, and to the expanding literature on the relationships among aesthetics, race, and cultural identity more generally. Particularly impressive is the way in which Meintjes integrates her topical, methodological, and theoretical concerns with her own representational strategies as a writer.

The topical focus of Meintjes' book is *mbaqanga*, the mass-mediated vocal and instrumental popular music best known outside South Africa from recording anthologies like the Earthworks/Virgin Indestructible Beat

of Soweto series and the late Mahlathini's international tours with the Mahotella Queens. Targeted predominantly toward Zulu audiences on the apartheid airwaves, and the local market that accommodated itself to legislated ethnic separatism, *mbaqanga* was an eclectic genre that peaked in popularity in South Africa during the 1960s and 70s, incorporating (*inter alia*) elements of township jazz and jive, African-American soul, neotraditional African guitar styles, and various indigenous and syncretic choral traditions. Largely lacking a basis in live performance—indeed, the rise of *mbaqanga* was contemporaneous with, and in part occasioned by, the exile of many of South Africa's celebrated jazz and stage performers of the 1950s—this music offers a prime site, as Meintjes amply demonstrates, for studying the technological mediation of indigenously inflected popular music outside Western culture industry centers, a ubiquitous twentieth-century phenomenon that ethnomusicologists have begun examining only in recent decades (Coplan 1985; Manuel 1988 and 1993).

Meintjes' interest in *mbaqanga* goes well beyond writing an under-examined genre into South African music history. Recognizing that the apartheid state exerted its hegemony as much through cultural institutions as through bureaucratic civil or military ones, she examines the recording studio as a microcosm of the society within which it exists. In the apparently neutral space of the studio, she argues,

the complexities of race politics are present but play out implicitly through other means . . . In contrast to many South African spaces that are acutely racialized and overtly politicized, the studio reveals how South Africa's ruthless politics are infused with feeling and embedded in the struggles of daily living and in expressive forms that on the surface appear to have little to do with race. (9)

Methodologically informed by the encounter between the anthropology of sound and popular music studies' concern with the institutional sociology of the music industry (Keil and Feld 1994), Meintjes uncovers the social contests that circulate around and through the minutiae of studio practice. She examines the ways in which variously positioned musicians, engineers, producers, and other role players, all with particular interests and value systems, collaborate and compete in a high-tech studio setting to sonically realize images of racial and ethnic identity as musical style. Beyond the boundaries of the apartheid state, she also considers the intersection of global forces with local and individual struggles to reshape social life by reworking expressive forms.

Since the inception of South African popular music studies, scholars have recognized that the means of producing and distributing expressive

culture have tended to pass out of subaltern communities of origin and into the hands of commercial and ideological interests antagonistic to—or at least separate from—the social development of such communities (Coplan 1979). Meintjes rightly points out that the recording studio has remained somewhat of a “black box” in the ethnomusicological literature:

Ethnomusicology has been particularly slow to recognize the creative potential and semiotic nuance of technology in music making and to include its analysis within the field's interpretive frameworks. This is in part an outcome of the facts that ethnomusicologists have privileged live performance, expected technology to take away from both creative processes and from the experience of music, and have focused historically on musics that have, or seem to have, a life of their own outside the music industry . . . As long as the studio was thought of as a site into which creative agents and compositional ideas would go, get compromised by technological manipulation there, then emerge packaged for consumption, there was little need for detailed analysis of its processes. (280, n.27)

Though tucked away in a footnote, the disciplinary critique voiced here (which Meintjes acknowledges has been somewhat mitigated in recent years), encapsulates her project at large. Her book offers a timely, acutely observed ethnographic analysis of the recording studio as a cultural institution, an analysis that ably complements, and in some respects challenges, the broad brush-stroke narrative characteristic of many sociologically oriented accounts of commercial music production.

“In the studio's fragmenting and circuitous practice,” Meintjes writes in her introduction, “lie openings for poetic innovation, for social and professional repositioning, and for empowering moves” on the part of music-makers (2). Methodologically speaking, she also sees in these studio practices an opening for examining a variety of ways in which music serves socially situated actors as a strategic and symbolic resource. The object of Meintjes' analysis, therefore, is less the broad social-historical arc of a particular genre or the general cultural system from which it emerges, than a constellation of specific, fleeting sociomusical interactions observed during the course of a series of typical studio production sessions. *Sound of Africa!* consequently unfolds as a series of analytical vignettes clipped from the clamor of studio talk and music-making. Each focuses on particular “moments,” “gestures,” and “utterances” with Goffmanesque attention¹ to the microsocial dynamics that are at play in given situations, from which Meintjes “writes outwards” to illuminate the broader social processes in

which they are embedded. In so doing, she documents the shifting ways in which music-makers in the studio manipulate and elaborate on sounds to articulate a sense of personal and collective personhood; strive for creative and political voice; invoke, reproduce or refigure social stereotypes; and reach for commercial and symbolic success. Though there is little in this approach that does not fall within the purview of conventional musical ethnography, and Meintjes' research design is as extensive in scope as those from which other scholars have made far more general cultural claims, it is the consistency with which she keeps the pragmatics of the microcultural in view in the context of ethnotheoretical debates that renders this study distinctive.

Sound of Africa! is a writerly text that enacts what it sets out to argue: that any mode of cultural mediation—including Meintjes' own—necessarily functions both as a conduit and as a filter, reshaping the events and social identities that it ostensibly reflects. Meintjes highlights the parallels between the studio's mode of operation and the production of an ethnographic text by adopting the studio's terminology to point out the dialogically constructed nature of her own account. Thus the individual chapters of the book are called "cuts," which are subdivided into various "takes" of scenes that are usually presented in an opening "guide vocal." Meintjes sometimes metaphorically rewinds and replays the moments she is examining, and her analyses are focused in "mixes," and sometimes "remixes" that offer alternative interpretations of given events. While at least one reviewer has found this literary conceit distracting (Coplan 2003), I find Meintjes' experimental approach to combining the form and content of her study well motivated from a theoretical point of view and congruent with her findings. She notices, for example, that her studio interlocutors afford greater attention to the manipulation of sound and textural change at the microlevel than they do to the marking of harmonic and melodic patterning or genre designations in the course of their interactions. She also finds—and this contrasts noticeably with the findings of studio ethnographers working in other locations (Porcello 1996)—that *mbaqanga* music-makers tend to invoke a shifting range of ethnic and other identity markers to characterize their experience of sound, rather than referring, for example, to the sonic attributes of other recorded models. Meintjes' close attention to the details of musical timbre and the poetics of studio communication as sounds are reworked, overlaid, and their meanings negotiated is aptly conveyed in the "fragmenting and circuitous practice" of her own account. And while the recursive, non-linear nature of her narrative requires a little extra work from the reader, her text effectively conveys the surreal juxtapositions of everyday life in a transitioning South Africa with the experience of doing fieldwork there. Interspersed between her

transcripts of studio talk and passages of technical cultural analysis are passages of visceral, vivid prose that seem seared into her memory.

The first chapter or "cut" of the book introduces the main participants in the recording that Meintjes documented at a Johannesburg studio in 1991 and 1992: an album by the group Isigqi Sesimanje titled *Lomculo Unzima*. Meintjes also here includes a brief account of hearing Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens perform in Austin, Texas, in 1993. This juxtaposition not only highlights the contemporaneous internationalization of *mbaqanga*, but also offers a more commercially celebrated case against which to situate the more characteristic, modestly-resourced, and locally-oriented recording project on which Meintjes centered her research. The theoretical focus of this cut is the question of genre, on which Meintjes takes a problematizing stance. Listing typical generic traits of *mbaqanga*, she argues, would overlook "the shifts in interpretive communicative praxis that make *mbaqanga* into what it is. Such a list would sidestep the social, historical, political, biographical, and many of the performed and sonic relationships by means of which *mbaqanga* is constituted, imputed with significance, transformed, and reinstated" (19,67).

Meintjes' counterproposal is persuasive and rather provocative: that the meaning of genre is to be found less in an assemblage of stylistic conventions than it is to be located in "the self-making rhetoric that elaborates artistic reputations." Given that the artistic personas and lived subjectivities of *mbaqanga* musicians often foreground ethnic and related identities, the implication here is that the process of genre definition participates in the politics of identity formation, an insight that denaturalizes the status of genre as culturally given, and redirects attention to the process and implicit social stakes of formulating musical definitions (69).

Cut 2 of the book engagingly brings anthropological frameworks to bear on the most futuristic of settings: the studio control room. Attending to the particularities of studio space, Meintjes documents how the physical environment in which *mbaqanga* is produced is a culturally constructed space with a mystique that both derives from and informs the music that is created there. The second part of cut 2 explores how the studio can acquire "magical" properties and be experienced as a "fetish," due to its restricted-access interiority as an "inner world"; its hyper-technological, futuristic iconicity; the extreme control it offers over sonic experience; and the way in which it allows the diffuse constituent elements of the "track" to emerge as the focus of collaborative studio artistry. While Meintjes registers claims that the studio can serve as a creative resource available to all who work in it, she observes how differential access to the space and its technological practices superimpose broader South African social differences onto the professional divisions of labor within it. Those most awed

and alienated by the studio environment, she observes, are *mbaqanga* musicians, whose relative lack of technical knowledge, language competence, and shared listening repertoires place barriers between them and their professional interlocutors and between experts, laborers, and capital (102–4). The role of predominantly white sound engineers in *mbaqanga* production is also introduced in this cut but is periodically taken up in the remainder of the book (and is well worth tracing via the index). Recognizing the latter as crucial—if often culturally misinformed and reluctant—co-producers of the genre, Meintjes observes how engineers mediate their own musical and professional values vis-à-vis those of producers and musicians in their negotiated manipulation of the sonic details of recorded tracks.

Having presented the broad object and setting of the research, the remaining four cuts of the book share a concern for the ways in which discourses about social identities impinge on studio production processes and, in turn, are disseminated through them. Cut 3 explores the notion of “liveness” as a trope of African musical authenticity, which Meintjes points out is an illusion of sounding live that is constructed through technological intervention in the studio and mediated symbolically through discourses about the natural and the artistic. She questions the notion that “to sound African is to sound live,” linking it to pervasive stereotypes concerning the “naturalness” of African musicality, though she acknowledges that such views can be differently invested and are espoused by some of her musical interlocutors themselves (118–19). Quoting some acutely observed studio exchanges, she notes, moreover, that “the essentialized self in discourse does not cohere directly with the practicing self at work in the studio,” describing instances where the labor invested by musicians in honing skills that might appear natural are brought to the surface (122). She concludes that the tension between the purported authenticity of performance and the falsity of mediated sound is a discursive one (139).

Whereas discursive constructions of “Africanness” are the focus of cut 3, cuts 4 and 5 explore how sounds are variously “figured” in terms of alternative identifications within South Africa. Cut 4 considers how tropes of whiteness are imputed to particular musical gestures vis-à-vis a more encompassing South Africanness, and looks to the cultural work that stereotypes can nonetheless perform in shaping feeling, embodied identities (168). For Meintjes, this is an ambivalent process: while she notes that it is with the knowledge of the constructedness of racial and ethnic categories that musicians can jokingly “loosen the [musical] sign from its signified and hang it on other forms” (167–68), she reports that “at least some music-makers assume fundamentally racialized differences in their cultural, sensuous, or even physiological listening experience, not only in preferred

listening repertoire" (170). These differences resonate outward beyond the studio in cut 5, where Meintjes argues that "just as sounds are gathered, built on, juxtaposed, isolated, and reworked into expressive forms in the studio process, so too are figures of ethnic difference overlaid, reconsidered, disavowed, or embraced" (180). The grim ramifications of this in the national context emerge in the opening sequence of the cut, when Meintjes and TJ Lemon (the journalist whose photographs productively accompany Meintjes' text), witness a fatal attack perpetrated by members of the nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party. In speculating on the complex relationships between gestures of Zulu cultural assertion and politically motivated atrocities, Meintjes reflects on how the aesthetic feeds back into the civic and the political, providing expressive forms "with which to mark, live in, reflect on, and shape categories of social difference" (207).

The sixth and final cut examines *mbaqanga's* international circulation as world music, returning to the case of Mahlathini, who at a particular moment serves Meintjes' studio interlocutors as a model while they attempt to fashion sounds that might enable access to foreign stages (220). Mahlathini's celebrated "groaning" voice serves as one such sonic signifier. On one hand, this gesture is imitated by local musicians as an exoticizing cultural marker with which to pitch their performance to projected audiences in the culturally imagined domain of "overseas." On the other hand, as Meintjes shows, the same gesture, semiotically speaking, could be read as a de-exoticizing, domesticating move. The concluding cut of the book reviews the multiple, intersecting levels at which mediation is considered in Meintjes' study: as technological manipulation, as the negotiation and arbitration of musical labor, as poetic language attempting to convey the qualities and ineffability of sound, as the brokering of personal and collective positions within systems of power, and as a semiotic theory of meaning. It is in the convergence of all these forms of mediation, Meintjes argues, that social difference is produced and reinforced (261).

Sound of Africa! is a conceptually nuanced and challenging book that addresses a range of important theoretical and methodological questions currently confronting cultural anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and particularly South African cultural and popular music scholars. Meintjes raises the bar for attentively describing and acutely analyzing the complexities of sociomusical phenomena; moreover, she addresses these concerns through the form as well as the content of her text. Yet what I have argued to be a strength of the book could be viewed by some as a liability. In its attention to the ephemera of social and aesthetic practice, and its tight integration of subject, data, and theory, Meintjes inevitably offers a highly selective account of an extensive musical domain that arguably remains somewhat indistinct at the close of her account. Given its

strong orientation towards theoretical issues, readers interested in such topics as the repertoire, stylistic and choreographic conventions, or the discography of *mbaqanga* will find useful pointers but not systematic treatment of these questions in this book.

Though Meintjes is intensely aware of the racial and interpersonal politics of studio interaction and ethnographic representation, as well as the penetration of global cultural vectors within South African commercial performance, readers are offered only the briefest of glimpses into relevant processes pertaining to Meintjes' focus: the production of a particular recording by Isigqi Sesimanje. This is more a question of emphasis than of omission, and Meintjes' book raises several questions that might best be pursued in future research. But it would not, I think, have compromised her overall design to have examined—as she does in numerous other pertinent asides throughout the book—aspects of the music production process that combine to place *mbaqanga* in a racially circumscribed position in the South African marketplace and cultural imaginary. Examples of such processes that are revealed seem suggestive: Meintjes makes tantalizing mention of the roles of studio producers in dictating the sartorial personas of “their” artists, and alludes to the existence of a post-production A&R committee charged with setting standards and vetting recordings for commercial release. Even a cursory sense of the discourses informing such additional instances of cultural brokerage would help us to see how other institutional practices frame and intersect with the activities of artists, producers, and engineers, cumulatively serving to make this music “Zulu.”²

Notes

1. Chicago-based sociologist Erving Goffman brought an acute qualitative dimension to social analysis in foregrounding and theorizing the microsocial interactions of daily life as microcosms of broader social processes. See, e.g., Goffman (1973). For a useful recent overview of Goffman's work, see Lemert and Branaman (1997).

2. These discourses are surely both amplified and refracted by other discursive practices relating to marketing, product labeling and presentation, and the formulation and cultivation of ethnically conceived distribution channels.

References

- Coplan, David. 1979. The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900–1960. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5 (2): 135–64.
- . 1985. In *Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- . 2003. Review of Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a*

- South African Studio. Anthropological Quarterly* 76 (1): 135–49.
- Goffman, Erving. [1959] 1973. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press.
- Keil, Charles and Steven Feld. 1994. *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lemert, Charles and Ann Branaman, eds. 1997. *The Goffman Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Manuel, Peter. [1988] 1993. *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Survey*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Porcello, Thomas. 1996. *Sonic Artistry: Music, Discourse, and Technology in the Sound Recording Studio*. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.