

George De Stefano takes a look at recorded music and the ethnological process in his review of the latest **Hugh Tracey** recordings from Africa to be published on CD.

Colonial Dance Bands

Kenya, Tanganyika, Portuguese East Africa, Northern Rhodesia, Belgian Congo, 1950 and 1952

Bulawayo Jazz

Southern Rhodesia, 1950, 51, 52

Both titles: Sharp Wood Productions (www.swp-records.com)



The Ghanaian scholar Kofi Agawu, in an essay criticizing the ways ethnomusicologists think and write about Africa, cites a 1953 speech that Hugh Tracey, the renowned collector of African music, gave to the International Folk Music Council. Tracey noted that the Council conferees all were Europeans, which put them at a disadvantage in discussing the music of "a people radically unlike ourselves."

But Tracey urged Europeans to assume the burden of speaking for "the African" because "he" [sic] was "pathetically incapable of defending his own culture and indeed is largely indifferent to its fate... we... are attempting to tide over the period during which irreparable damage can be done and until Africans themselves will be capable of appearing at our conferences as well-informed representatives of their own peoples."

Agawu, a musicologist specializing in both African and European classical music, observes that Tracey's characterization of Africans as "radically unlike" Europeans reflects a long-lasting strategy of "differencing." Emphasizing differences between European and non-European cultures rather than similarities is a tradition as old as the Enlightenment, and is inextricable from the history of European colonialism and racism.

An Englishman who went to Rhodesia in 1920 to run his family's tobacco farm, Hugh Tracey was captivated by the songs his Shona-speaking African workers sang as they toiled in the fields. The songs piqued his interest in sub-Saharan indigenous music, and from 1929 until his death in 1977, he dedicated himself to seeking out and recording African musicians.

Tracey was an enlightened colonialist convinced of the enormous aesthetic value of African music and of its potential to promote African social and cultural development. He pursued his passion in spite of the resistance of colonial administrations and religious authorities to the idea that Africans possessed

any culture worthy of respect and preservation.

His earliest efforts were a few discs he made of performances by young Africans from southern Rhodesia for the British division of Columbia Records. These tracks were the first selections of indigenous Rhodesian music to be recorded and published. The pioneering producer John Hammond used some of this music as an overture to the legendary "From Spirituals to Swing" concert he presented in 1938 at Carnegie Hall. During the Thirties, Tracey recorded hundreds of African performances on plain aluminum discs using a primitive portable recording machine.

In 1954 he founded the International Library of African Music (ILAM) in South Africa and issued a series of more than 200 albums that constitute a vast and incomparable archive of indigenous African music.

Tracey felt that Africans eventually would no longer need European interlocutors and would be able to represent themselves, and he believed that European domination in Africa would be temporary. But, as Agawu notes, Tracey, like other Africanist ethnomusicologists, "did not pursue the task of transferring power to 'Africans themselves' with any urgency." Nor could he even if he had wanted to because, Agawu adds, "maintaining an imbalance of power is logically necessary for ethnomusicological practice."

Bulawayo Jazz and *Colonial Dance Bands* comprise some 50 tracks that Tracey recorded between 1950 and 1952, before liberation movements transferred power from Europeans to Africans. The music comes to us highly mediated, by Tracey's taste (lucky for us he had good ears), technological and commercial constraints, and most importantly, by the lack of power, both political and discursive, that Africans experienced under the brutality of European rule. The name of one of bands featured on *Bulawayo Jazz* says everything about the environment in which the recordings were made: De Dark Brownies.

Alright, you say, we get it; these two albums are overdetermined as cultural artifacts, the performances compromised and even distorted by colonial relations of production. But do they nonetheless command our attention? Most definitely. Some selections are ragged and forgettable, but more often we hear talented musicians playing with soul, inventiveness and joie de vivre.

Although some of Tracey's recordings were released commercially by the South African Gallo Records, most of his invaluable collection never reached an international market, having been accessible mainly to scholars. This changed in 1998, when the drummer and producer Michael Baird, with Tracey's son Andrew, launched the Historical Recordings by Hugh Tracey series on the Sharp Wood Productions label. *Bulawayo Jazz* and *Colonial Dance Bands* are the last two albums in the series, and both include



tracks that have never been released before.



Some of the colonial dance bands were professional, playing in hotels to Europeans; others were amateur outfits that copied what they heard on the radio and performed their versions for mostly African audiences. The typical lineup was tenor sax in the lead, along with trumpet or clarinet, strummed banjo or guitar, stand-up bass or tuba standing in for the bass, drums, and assorted percussive noisemakers like rattles and struck bottles. The bands' repertoires included rumbas, tangos, fox-trots, and songs in the taarab style, a homegrown idiom that blended Swahili and Arabic influences as well as Indian and Egyptian film music. Taarab numbers like "Baadina" by the Egyptian Social Club and the four tracks by the Mombasa-based Jauharah Orchestra provide some of the album's most appealing moments.

Bulawayo Jazz (the style) sprung up in the city of the same name, a business center of southern Rhodesia. As Michael Baird observes in his thorough liner notes, until the 1960s Bulawayo's was the only jazz style other than the gypsy swing of the Hot Club de France to emerge outside the United States.

The Bulawayo sound centered on the alto sax playing lead, usually as part of a front line that included tenor sax and trumpet. Strummed banjos and acoustic guitars, double bass or tubas and trombones playing the bass parts, and occasionally pianos and violins, made up the rest of the ensembles. Jazz aficionados may hear echoes of early New Orleans and Kansas City styles in some of the tracks. But the raw material is African folk music or original compositions based on traditional sources, not the blues and Tin Pan Alley pop tunes that fed early American jazz. This is distinctly African jazz, as fans of later artists like the South African saxophonist Dudu Pukwana will immediately recognize.

It also is jazz without much improvisation, with most tracks clocking in at less than three minutes. This was for commercial reasons, as Baird acknowledges: "These tracks were musically 'censored' so to speak, clean-cut with a minimum of improvisation" so that they could be released as singles by Gallo Records, whose owner subsidized Tracey's field trips.



This means that we're not hearing what these musicians really played, with the exception of "Skokiaan," a tune by saxophonist, songwriter and vocalist August Musarurwa, the leading light of the Bulawayo scene. (Musarurwa's ubiquitous on *Bulawayo Jazz*, playing on 15 of the album's 23 tracks, with both the Cold Storage Band and the Chaminuka Band.) "Skokiaan," named for a potent homemade liquor, was an international hit in the 1950s, recorded by Louis Armstrong, the Four Lads, Perez Prado, and Bill Haley and The Comets.

The version on *Bulawayo Jazz* actually is a practice take, but as Baird notes, it represents the true sound of the Cold Storage Band, loose, cooking, and "exploding with energy and improvisation."

Though intensely rhythmic, Bulawayo jazz didn't swing, hewing more to a South African approach midway between straight eighth notes and swing time. "I Charlie Jive" by the Los Angeles Orchestra, is

one of the few tracks played in true swing time.

What's surprising is the sound quality of these half-century-old recordings. It's remarkably good, especially considering the state of the existing technology and the conditions under which the recordings were made. Most of the performances were captured in Bulwayo, many of them in a social hall. Like nearly all of Tracey's recordings, they're in mono, captured with hand-held mics, with few fade-ins or fade-outs because Tracey felt those techniques violated the integrity of the performance.

Bulawayo Jazz and *Colonial Dance Bands* are time capsules from a dark era in human history, when Africans were subject peoples, living under foreign domination, their labor exploited and even their art compromised and warped by the demands of "Babylon system," as Bob Marley would say.

Since the end of colonialism, African musicians have been in an incomparably better position, despite the deep inequities of their postcolonial societies and global capitalism. Consider this partial roll call of brilliant artists who have emerged from Africa since the 1950s: Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Manu Dibango, Orchestra Baobab, Super Rail Band, Fela Kuti, King Sunny Ade, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Youssou N'Dour, Baaba Maal, Salif Keita, Amadou and Mariam, Maryam Mursal, Thione Seck, Toumani Diabate, and the late Ali Farka Toure.

Though dependent upon transnational recording companies to distribute and promote their music, today's African musicians are far better compensated than Tracey's, most of whom never received proper payment for their work. (Some long overdue restitution now will be made, as a proportion of royalties from the sale of ILAM recordings on Smithsonian's Global Sound website will be distributed to the original musicians, or their descendants.) They now have access to an international market, and perform all over the world to rapturous audiences. In July 2006, I and several thousand other fans had the enormous pleasure of witnessing Amadou and Mariam turn Central Park into one big joyous party, a fête in a global village, to paraphrase one of their song titles.

I think that Hugh Tracey would have dug the Malian couple and their high-powered band. And as he shook his English hips to their dance beats, he might have realized that African music, far from being "radically unlike" the West's, is now "ours" and a dominant and irreplaceable strain in the world's music.
- George De Stefano Read more about the [Hugh Tracey recordings](#) in RootsWorld:

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