

Anyone who witnessed Barbara Frum's rather tasteless gushings over Paul Simon, on the Christmas Eve broadcast of *The Journal*, would probably concur that his new record, *Graceland*, has acquired the status of a genuine cultural event. Even in an industry where hyperbole is the norm, its reception has been surprising. Simon is, after all, hardly the cutting edge of American music. Nonetheless, cries of "album of the decade" have already been heard. In a long article in the *New York Times* (26 August 1986), for example, Stephen Holden effused that it "effervesces with an extraordinary sense of artistic freedom and adventure." While under other circumstances this endorsement alone might trigger suspicion in the minds of the more politically sophisticated, the response of large sections of the left and the cognoscenti has been almost equally unreserved.

But because it was recorded in South Africa, using local musicians, it's also an album which seems almost calculatingly designed to generate a whole set of uneasy responses among many people opposed to the apartheid regime. The more simple-minded complaints either zero in on its alleged evasion of South African politics, or aim for higher ground by attacking more generally its "exploitation" of African music and musicians.

Neither of these objections is, by itself, very forceful. Although it's true that Simon eschews direct commentary on South Africa, these issues are very close to the surface in "The Boy in the Bubble" and "Homeless." But he's much more concerned with enacting the encounter between Africa and the metropolis to which he alludes explicitly in "You Can Call Me Al." On most tracks this is realized by counterposing southern African music to Simon's very metropolitan literary sensibility.

This strategy has its own rewards. *Graceland* is much less susceptible than most of Simon's work to accusations of preciosity. The tension between his voice and lyrics and the instrumental work gives it an edge which is absent from much of the rest of his music. This is most evident on the tracks which feature Baghiti Khumalo and Ray Phiri. I find the two songs with Ladysmith Black Mambazo less interesting because they attempt to reconstruct on a purely vocal level the edge which emerges, on other tracks, in the interplay between voice and instruments.

When the perspectives embodied in African instrumentation and Western lyrical concerns are held in suspension, as indeed they are on many tracks, *Graceland* is most successful. But Simon blows it completely when he attempts a less ambiguous return to America. The zydeco track is merely embarrassing; the song recorded with Los Lobos is disastrous. It's difficult to relate them in any significant way to the concerns of the rest of the album, apart from the presence on both of an accordion. A polka would make as much sense.

Graceland isn't the first Simon album to incorporate non-metropolitan music. Nor is it the only recent album which seeks to construct a dialogue between African and Western musical concerns. Talking Heads' *Remain in Light* comes readily to mind. This is a project



which is obviously difficult. One runs the risk either of falling into a naive and often racist identification with "the primitive" or of simply raiding another culture for fast thrills. Juluka offered a horrifying example of what to expect when this tension isn't confronted. But Talking Heads negotiated it successfully; so, for the most part, does Simon.

But this relative success doesn't get him off the hook so easily. Other issues remain, precisely because it's South Africa which is being addressed. The most important of these is the cultural boycott. Simon has stated that he received approval for the trip from such prominent American anti-apartheid cultural activists as Harry Belafonte and Quincy Jones. Irrespective of the truth of this claim (and one would want more information about the context of these discussions than Simon has provided), it does raise the issue of the status of the boycott. It is, after all, sponsored and administered by the United Nations. The authority of individual Americans, however

prominent, to "clear" artists to work in South Africa is at best questionable.

In this context, Simon's claim that the boycott hurts black South Africans becomes particularly objectionable. And it's hard not to read his decision to include Linda Ronstadt, a prominent Sun City performer, on one track as a deliberate repudiation of the UN blacklist. The fact that "Under African Skies" happens to be the worst on the album is a purely serendipitous demonstration of the symbiotic relationship between art and politics. Linda Ronstadt has, after all, botched other musician's sessions. But here it's almost as if her voice drives the song into the third worldist bathos which the record elsewhere manages to evade. If this were a Lou Reed album, I'd be tempted to interpret the utter sentimentalism of the track as a calculated irony. But the man who wrote "Bridge Over Troubled Water" seems incapable of such finely calibrated effects.

Nonetheless, some very complex questions remain to be answered. The boycott was adopted at a time when the resistance movement within South Africa was at its lowest ebb. Its organizations were driven deeply underground, its leaders either jailed or in exile, and its mass base beaten temporarily into quiescence. Artists who identified with popular aspirations went into exile; there was good reason to be suspicious of most work being produced openly within the country.

This situation has been transformed in recent years. The current upsurge in popular resistance has been widely echoed in the arts. Increasingly, most interesting cultural production takes shape in often explicit dialogue with the liberation movement. In literature, in theatre, not least of all in music, there is a large body of sophisticated and politically engaged work. Canadians may be most familiar with the literary production; but even many of the mainstream popular musicians in South Africa have aligned themselves with the resistance. Is there any way through which this material could be made available to people outside South Africa without abandoning the boycott? Or in other words, is it possible to construct a policy which permits us to attack both the Rod Stewarts and Linda Ronstadts of the world and continue the isolation of the South African regime, and to diffuse the tremendously exciting work which is now being produced? One hopes so. *Graceland* is hardly the crucial test case for this dilemma. But it does, once again, focus these issues for us.

Paul Simon. *Graceland.* Produced by Paul Simon. Warner Brothers: 1986

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David Galbraith has lived and worked in southern Africa.

STATES OF GRACELAND