

BLACK MUSIC OF TWO WORLDS by JOHN STORM ROBERTS. Praeger, New York, 1972. pp. 286, photographs.

Most of this work consists of enthusiastic, and necessarily selective, description of most of the many and widespread forms which can be termed 'black music' in the Americas. The author shows an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject, some of which he knows from first-hand experience, the rest gained from obviously lengthy research into the existing printed and recorded data. To prepare oneself for the proper appreciation of the immense amount of information he supplies on musical, social and instrumental topics one should already have experience of the 350 or more discs which he lists in the 'Selected Discography', to which he makes continual, if unspecific, reference. In addition, he lists over a hundred titles in the 'Selected Bibliography'. In spite of this impressive backing, the work is written in a decidedly non-scientific tone. Although there are a great number of quotes, very few of them refer the reader to the specific sources, even to his own bibliography or discography. It is hard for a reviewer to say whether Roberts has deliberately popularised his language, or whether this is the result of a deliberately 'amateur' approach. Whichever it may be, his work is strong on the human, subjective attitude to the subject, and weaker where he broaches the fields of musicology, psychology, sociology, organology, or whatever other orthodox -ologies are concerned with the study of music and society. Some of the musical examples must be incorrectly engraved.

In the course of the book something of the author's underlying concern to find out just what constitutes 'Africanism' in music comes out. Overt features such as call-and-response structure, or rhythmic techniques, are apparent, but it is in discussing and generalising some of the less obvious elements of 'black music' and its relationship with society that this book is at its most interesting. It would have been useful to have had his conclusions about this summarised somewhere.

The book is set out in three parts, Old Cultures in a New World; Black Music of the Americas; The Music of Post-Colonial Africa. In the first he detects musical characteristics in the Americas which he associates with Africa and its social customs; in the second he discusses the musics of South America and the Caribbean leading on to Jazz; while the third section is devoted to present-day urban styles of performance in Africa and how they are affected by contact with foreign and indigenous African music.

The author is plainly an aficionado of Afro-American music in all its forms and his enthusiasms are spread generously wherever he detects the 'earmarks' of an African origin in the music. His comments on the 'black' music of the Americas are usually attached to the name and personal style of some individual or band, whereas his references to the African examples are usually covered by a general statement under the assumption that the African influence is self evident. Descriptions of much of the American Negro music are circumscribed by a limited vocabulary in which the words 'swing', 'jazz', 'soul', 'blues', among others, all work overtime yet are particularly uninformative — a form of jargon to which one cannot resist applying the description which the author coins in another connection — a "musico-mystagogic spiel". In describing various forms of Caribbean rumba which contain elements of African music his conclusion is stated in his own unique way: "All these types continue the strong song-dance-visual-aural-performer-spectator continuum that is fundamental to African aesthetic concepts", a windy way of saying, "The music *feels* African to me". However, the very nature of the subject often precludes the formal, scientific turn-of-phrase. By an accumulation of this kind of subjective opinion the book comes quite near to a definition of what "Africanism" in music means. That so much of the subjectivism is Roberts' may be a weakness; he does not quote black musicians' opinions extensively enough. Thus the conclusions probably reflect a white rather than a black, or African standpoint.

Admittedly, it is difficult to find published African standpoints on African music. The great majority of descriptions is by whites, which, while quite likely empirically accurate, may not have the intuitive insight of Africans. Roberts' baseline — the music of Africa as at present known to the western world — is as yet little understood from the performers' angle.

The book contains many interesting observations and comparisons which are too often weakened by over-enthusiastic or generalised claims, such as; "jazz has, like many a major music before it, become an 'art' music, no longer a 'people' music. In this it has left behind the greatest Africanism of all, for African music, with few exceptions, is (as well as a gods' music) a 'people' music." Reading the book, however, with any eye for this well-placed enthusiasm, there is no doubt that no other single book has achieved this degree of comprehensiveness or informativeness about Afro-American musics.

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