

Johnny Clegg: Still strong after all these years

J BROOKS SPECTOR | 18 SEPTEMBER 2012 02:37 (SOUTH AFRICA)

We meet Johnny Clegg while he is preparing for his concert appearances at the Montecasino's Teatro, before the rest of his current South African tour. Despite his decades on the road, Clegg insists he still loves the touring life – and looks forward to it every time he gets ready to go. By J BROOKS SPECTOR.



Now clearly in solid middle age, Johnny Clegg has begun harvesting honours and awards that define and recognise a lifetime of achievement. On his most recent Canada and US tour, for example, Clegg received an honorary doctorate from Dartmouth College, one of America's most distinguished liberal arts universities. And the person who handed Clegg this honour was Jim Yong Kim, now president of the World Bank.

On that late spring day in New England, after describing Clegg's unique role in Apartheid South Africa, Kim closed with, "Today, in a better time, your songs unite the crowds who throng the rugby stadiums and pack the public arenas of your beloved South Africa and echo around the world.... [And] with the company African Sky, you saw the opportunity both to protect our planet and put people to work by recycling e-waste..."

Dartmouth's award came just six weeks after South Africa gave Clegg its own Ikhamanga national honours award. At the time of interviewing, only two days before his Johannesburg concerts, Clegg was mostly struggling to sort out the right jacket for his upcoming concerts. The first one offered by the set and costume designer isn't right, it's too subtle – there's no strong message, no sense of place, no local flavour. More colour, a stronger pattern, more impact, more there – that's what he wants. A few minutes later, he's shown a second choice and agrees the fabric is much better. He's right.

It is as a bit of a shock to realise Johnny Clegg is 59 years old and that he's been on the country's national cultural landscape since the 1970s. With a shrug, he says he'll probably need arthroscopic surgery on one knee – after all that dancing and those thousands of high Zulu-style kicks. It comes as a second shock to remember that I first saw and heard him at the legendary Market Café, more than thirty years ago. He was performing songs from his early album, *Universal Men*, together with his musical collaborator, Sipho Mchunu. They were doing lots of performances to get some popular buzz going for record sales, because SABC radio wouldn't play their music. If the hugely popular and political hits like "Scatterlings of Africa" and "Asimbonanga" were still off in the future, on that small stage at the Market Café, the shape of cultural things to come was already moving into focus.

In his 1996 interview in *Cutting Through the Mountain*, Clegg explored the circumstances of his initial introduction into Zulu culture and music. "Then in Killarney [an area of expensive Johannesburg apartments], I was arrested by the police, and charged with trespassing... And there was this constant sort of innuendo put across to me by the police when I was arrested, and by the caretakers, that there's something else that I'm after, what's going on, am I being abused, or... they could never have accepted it for what it was. I realised that these people couldn't see; they couldn't see the reality. There was a reality there that they could not actually perceive..."

One time, after he was arrested, the story goes as follows. "The police took me to my mum, and said, 'Listen, we've caught your boy inside Wemmer hostel, it's extremely dangerous, two or three bodies come out there every weekend from inter-tribal warfare, and it's a place of illicit gambling, stolen goods, prostitution. We go in there armed. It's no place for a young white boy to be. In the first place it's dangerous and in the second place it's illegal. And you know, as he gets older, we're going to arrest him and put him in jail. So you just keep him out [of] the way.'"

Clegg added that although his mother loved jazz and "wanted to be Ella Fitzgerald" herself, they had huge fights about his going to learn the music and dances of the Zulu men in the hostels. "So she just said, 'Look after yourself. And I'm not going to come bail you out anymore. You carry money in your pocket, you pay your fine.'"

After one arrest, Clegg remembers, "... some of the police were actually curious. You know, they'd arrest me; they'd kind of intimate that they'd saved me from a very, very dark fate. They were young guys, and they would sit there puzzled as I said, no I'm having a great time, and I'd explain to them how I really enjoyed dancing and learning how to stick fight."

As we start our own conversation this time around, Johnny Clegg wants to talk about Bob Dylan and how he changed popular music forever. Unsaid is my thought that Clegg forever changed South African and world music with his own unique fusion of folk, pop and African rhythms; sounds and lyrics blended in a way that was years ahead of everybody else. Clegg says Dylan was the master at telling stories, narratives that had a musical texture – but curiously, this seems a great deal like Clegg's own body of work too.

We settle back and talk about the challenges of getting older. TS Eliot's "I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled" hovers in the air as Clegg turns to speak of the Zulu cultural value of "*inkani*" – that determined, even stubborn, sense of life force.

To win in stick fighting for a day, one is a bull, he explains, but when one strives to become a bull for all the days in all that one tries to do, that is something else entirely. Clegg explains this has been the secret of many of the things he's seen in life. It is not just a question of talent – it is also a question of perseverance. Traditional societies like the Zulu culture still esteem such values, even while some western societies are losing them.

Zulu life, like all traditional societies, also has distinct age cohorts as you move from being a boy through to becoming a senior elder. Now, however, too many people are no longer shepherded through these rites of passage and maturation. The sense of belonging is crucial, and without this we miss something important – even if we can't precisely put our finger on it.

This is Clegg the social anthropologist launching into a compact lecture series on the collision of traditional and modern culture. It is not particularly surprising; he was, after all, an anthropology lecturer at Wits University, way back when. With his South African concert audiences he has, in fact, been known to launch into extended stories that connect his music, his life, and his understanding of traditional South African societies – such as his experiences (and the life lessons that came with it) as the neophyte manager of a chicken farm staffed by African farm workers.

As we settle in further, Clegg says he is creating a musical about his own life story – his struggles, defeats, and conflicts musically – and with himself, his mother, with Apartheid, and even with his musical partner Sipho Mchunu. It should be ready for the stage in 2014. He will not be in the work himself, but it most definitely will not be one of those ubiquitous, banal tribute shows that are on stage so frequently now, he promises.

Defeats? What defeats? He explains he nearly failed high school and it was only because he did isiZulu as a subject that he finally passed. He actually wanted to be a game ranger – he spent every weekend he could camping in the bush – and he had a deep certainty that it was through nature that he would be healed from all the pressures and tensions of his difficult teenage years. Along the way, the structured patterns of Zulu masculinity imparted to him the feeling that “there was something very magical about being a man”. He says, “I met migrants who had walked to Johannesburg from Zululand, who had fought in five or six tribal wars... they were anonymous, but they had no real ambition to become famous [to the larger world]; they were just doing what came naturally to them by being a man.”

But then he adds, “They also had an amazing sense of humour. In a really dark moment, they would find a spot of humour. A man could be killed in a car accident and someone would rush in to steal the deceased man’s R10,000 shoes. Now, we’d say that was terrible, but the Zulu response might be to say, ‘A bird feathers its nest with the feather of a dead bird.’ You get mugged – you are injured and robbed; and then you are sitting with the men drinking. They interrogate you and they want to know everything about what happened. At that point you realise you have been blind to so many things all around you; that up until now you have been ‘fast asleep’. The saying is, ‘The old, dry, dead grass which is asleep is only made new by its burning’ – there is a gift in that insight and you have to find it.”

We are moving fast into one of those metaphysical discussions of what we know, how we know it, and how we can find appropriate metaphors or ways of describing all this. Language frames experience, Clegg emphasises.

And now he is onto describing the sociology of the single sex male hostel as an intensification and amplification of the traditional Zulu ways of living in rural areas. The old cultural ‘tools’ have been reshaped and reused in new ways to adapt to the new experience. I’m listening carefully as Clegg seems to be channelling anthropologists like Clifford Geertz or Margaret Mead; I realise we’ve been speaking for over thirty minutes and we have barely touched on Clegg’s astonishing music and music making.

But then we are on to his work with that recent thirteen-part television series, *An Imagined Country*. This was designed to introduce the complexities of South Africa to visitors to the country during the 2010 Soccer World Cup – beyond the simple tourist spots. The producer’s goal was to examine the combinations of people, the landscape of where they live and the art and craft they produce as a result. It was meant to ask how people related to their respective landscapes and how that ended up being reflected in their art, their dance, their crafts. They were fascinating shows and should be available everywhere.

One key question in doing this series was how people saw themselves in their landscapes. Clegg explains the challenge of doing this series was that “I was also someone who was learning about my country... I took ownership of the information and I felt as if I was sharing this information with other South Africans... And the people we interviewed were told they would be speaking with Johnny Clegg and that he was really interested in what you were doing and why you were doing it.” He admits that in the process of doing this series, “I rediscovered my own country... I learned as an artist it is impossible to be an artist without an ego; but I also had to learn that I had to deal with another artist’s ego in a medium I had no knowledge about – I had to be like a piece of blotting paper. I had to really listen!”

Our talk turns to yet another non-musical activity – his recycling project that now deals with plastics, paper, cardboard and hazardous waste. This has evolved out of his original project to recycle electronic waste projects. Now he is recycling used ink cartridges that are shredded and used in making bricks that are light, strong, durable building materials. The project is called New Earth Waste Solutions – NEWS – and it is yet another side of an eternally restless man. With all his many activities, he explains, “I feel really special! But what I really need is a PA!” Any really energetic volunteers?

Finally, we turn to music, in this case the future for South African music – and music more generally. Where is it going now? Clegg says, “I did my last album in 2010 abroad and in 2011 here. I do an album every two, two-and-a-half years, whenever I think I have something to say. But the world is going back to where it was in the 1950s – to the single. Albums were creations of the record company.”

“Now we’re going back to the original model. You’ll write something song by song – it’s out on iTunes, something – but this model is not working perfectly yet. Regardless, this is forcing a resurgence of live music and that is where musicians are making their money now... But the digital revolution has demeaned the product from its social meaning.” The man is a whirlwind of ideas.

And unstoppable. He continues, “A song is now around for a couple of weeks only and so we’re living in the permanent present. We can’t endow things with meaning. If you have a song, a story, a painting, it shapes you and gives you a certain kind of nourishment. This is the role of art. And it is the highest form of nourishment you can get. It puts your life into quality space from the mundane, and that’s why people go to shows, the ballet, and opera, whatever. But that special thing is being lost and that is the crisis of the digital age.” He even draws in the idea that live artists must now compete with performers who are already dead, but whose very performances are brought back to a virtual life. “This resurrection of dead guys means I have to compete with live guys *and* dead guys – we’re living in a cut-and-paste world and there is no sense of trajectory.”

When asked where he’ll be ten years from now, Clegg says he eventually sees himself as a film score writer, although he admits he still needs to learn more about the technology. Then there is the possibility of working with the SA Tourism Board to help bring the hidden parts of South Africa to the knowledge of the wider world. The man is a national treasure himself and must be harnessed carefully in the coming years. Listen once again to all the great favourites – “Asimbonanga”, “Scatterlings”, “Cruel, Crazy, Beautiful World”, “Dela”, “Work for All” – to remember just how much joy and inspiration he has given to so many during his long career.

In the coming weeks and months, Johnny Clegg will be performing in Monaco at the end of September; then there are concerts in Empangeni on 6 October, the next day in Pietermaritzburg; at Fancourt in George on 3 November and the following day in Port Elizabeth. And that’s just his schedule before Christmas. DM

Johnny Clegg

Human

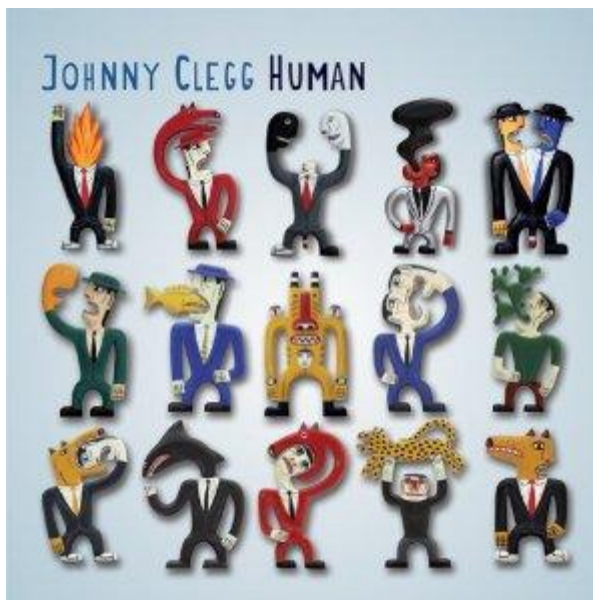
Appleseed Records

BluesWax Rating: 9

Once Banned in Africa

While all of us blues nuts can truly understand the racial strains that created this music, I don't think we can say we understand it in the same way

that **Johnny Clegg** does. Born in the U.K. and raised in Zimbabwe, Clegg took on the challenge of forming a band with mixed races in South Africa at a time in the late 1970s when that was not allowed. Since then he has sold millions of albums, but his story is so connected with what we listen to every day that it should be revisited again.



Fast forward to 2011 and Clegg's new compact disc, *Human*. Do I like it? Yes! This album has many rhythms that have roots from all parts of the globe. Each song keeps the album moving and never lets you skip ahead. While probably classified under "world music," judge for yourself. There are some songs that are folk, some rock, some African, but it doesn't really matter 'cause they all have a real meaning.

Johnny Clegg has notes for each song in the liner notes. They are short but add a little insight to each song. The songwriting hits on many topics, but no matter the topic, the overall vibe of the music is tranquility. There is a sincere humanity in his approach to music and lyrics that make this album so easy to listen to and relax and just want to hear it again. What is not to like about that? In a day when there is violence all over the world it is nice to have a piece of peace in our hands.

I admit my passion for music with feeling; I don't care what style it is. If the creators allow themselves to open up without any pretext and let their true selves out and unleash their inner soul to you, then you should listen. Most people cannot even open up that much, especially artistically. So the point I am making is to take a listen to "Manqoba (The Victorious)" and "Nyembezi (Tears)" and feel those songs. Holy crap, is that magic! The two songs play off each other so well and have an intensity that I want to frame and hang on a wall to be appreciated forever. I can't understand all of the words, but that is not the important part of these songs. Take a deeper listen.

Clegg has an illustrious career and has finally brought his recordings back to the American soil after a seventeen-year absence. He will be touring for this album as well, and I am going to be looking up that show. The blend of music is fresh and original. It does remind me at times of what **Taj Mahal** has done, but never so in depth. Taj was too American to truly hit Johnny's level. Johnny has his own story to tell.

Kyle M. Palarino is a contributing editor to BluesWax. He'd love to respond to your comments below.

Sep 11 2012 3:38PM

Fighting fit: Johnny Clegg

Mia McDonald



Clegg's life has been so adventurous that he's busy working on a musical autobiography. The plan is to stage this production by 2014; the production will be driven by various complicated plot lines. The project has just begun, so Clegg is reading through the scripts and plotting and planning away. The autobiographical musical will be released in South Africa and is also intended for London's West End.

With many concerts lined up, including the National Botanical Gardens tours and concerts at Monte Casino this month, Clegg needs to stay fit and works out twice a day at two gyms that have different equipment. The upcoming concerts have exciting new elements and besides the wonder of Clegg's dancing, there will be audio visual clips and a crew of Pantsula dancers.

His latest album entitled, Human, is doing well Clegg says: "I can bring out an album every two years or so. It might take a bit longer or shorter." Essentially there's no immediate pressure to churn out the next offering, and this means Clegg can maintain the integrity with which he likes to approach music. He talks about the discovery he made as a young person that music could be used as a platform for discourse. He studied the lyrics of musicians like Randy Newman, who wrote about the great floods in Louisiana in the 1930s, layered with deep and humorous messages and pointing to the cracks in US society.

Another great influence was Jackson Brown, with the song "These Days". These are some of the writers that shaped Clegg. Bob Dylan's music also had a deep impact on him, "Dylan used music to entertain, his music is uplifting and it feeds a deeper connection to life." Closer to home, he loves Zahara, and a few other vocalists, including Carol King, Sheryl Crow and Kate Bush. While talking, Clegg, always cool, begins to sing a few lines of this and that.

Born in England, Clegg left when he was six months old, he was shaped by the influences of three African countries – Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. His life has been fuelled by his curiosity: "I've led a life determined by curiosity about how other people construct their universe."

Although his curiosity doesn't have the same intensity these days, Clegg says: "I'm a news addict. I'm extremely interested in news; I have news apps on my iPhone." Despite his news apps, Clegg doesn't find much value in social media, he has a Facebook account that's managed for him but he views Twitter discourses as a diversion from interaction between "real people in real time." Kids are much better at the techno revolution; I'm still suspicious of it. I want to create content, I have an old-fashioned approach. You can get involved in a huge Twitter discourse, but all these things are just passing moments. It's not a sustainable model."

Some experiences that he talks about fondly – interacting with real people in real time – include his recent tour to the US and Canada, touring with his band on a bus with 14 bunks for 15000km. Again Clegg refers to the way in which technology overcrowds existence. The tour bus had satellite TV and Wi-Fi "but the content on the channels was uninspiring".

"What is MTV? It's all just distraction. What does any of this mean for human loneliness?"

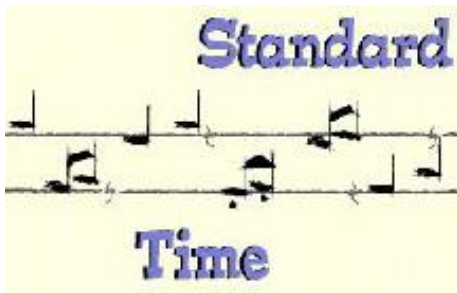
Clegg has learnt the value of "seeing things through, because I have a curiosity about my own life's story". "It's never about how you start off, it's about the way you end something." It's a message he's tried to bring home to his sons is that, "nobody gives a damn about you in your lonely, dark hours. This is why you need to find an internal frame of reference; you need to have the ability to motivate yourself without looking for applause."

His youngest son creates animated characters, "funny figures", and Jesse Clegg is feeling his way in music. Clegg says: "Both of my children have suffered under the cloud of celebrity." It's important for Jesse to find his own feet in music, but Clegg says "when he's ready he can come to me, and then we can perform together."

Clegg dances and he's fit, but he says "I love steak, but I need to take about five cholesterol tablets every time I have a steak. I also enjoy having a decent fish braai and I enjoy traditional African cuisine, like pap with meat preparations and stews." Though he loves a good braai, he's not much of a social drinker, Clegg has developed an alcohol allergy, his sinuses close up. But he does enjoy the occasional beer, his favourite beer is Corona. He also digs some local beers and he'll have a Lion or a Castle once in a while. Sometimes when he's on tour he'll have a beer just after the intense experience of the concert.

Other things that make him tick are appreciating other people's creativity. Clegg likes to go to art exhibitions, he enjoys going for drives and he reads a lot. Currently he's rereading Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, he's into subatomic physics and he's reading Mitchio Kako's work, The Next 20 Years. Its about physics and the interface that it has with biology.

Clegg is drawn to educational issues and believes that teachers in South Africa need to get away from the legacy of apartheid; they need to get better training themselves to understand what they are teaching. Earlier this year Clegg received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from Dartmouth College and it's his third, the others were from Wits and City University of New York. The curiosity that Clegg claims was the determining factor in his life, has taken him far indeed.



Johnny Clegg leaves them dancing in the aisles

Somerville Theater, Somerville, MA, June 27, 2012

Reviewed by Jeffrey B. Remz

Opening night can be a very tricky proposition for both fan and artist. After all, the kinks doubtlessly are going to be present, especially considering that the artist - in this case Johnny Clegg of South Africa - may have been off the road a bit.

Clegg's opening night of his North American tour was not exactly perfect, but that was only one small aspect of the nearly two-hour gig considering the quality of the songs and performers in habiting the stage. So much so, that after awhile the packed house was literally dancing in the aisles.

Clegg has been around a long time, first making his mark with the great, groundbreaking South African multi-racial band Juluka and then its successor Savuka before putting his name out front.

The problems on the first night were not major either - occasional conversations between Clegg and lead guitarist Andy Innes, who have been together for 19 years, before launching into the next song. That was about as "bad" as it got along with one guitar malfunction.

Fortunately, Clegg and band infused the songs, covering various parts of Clegg's career, with a lot of life. Clegg, at 59, has not lost anything in his vocal delivery. The sound tended to rely on an Afropop bent with quick guitar lines and a fast pace to the songs.

Clegg released his last state-side disc, "Human," in October 2010, so it's been awhile since he even released new music. And he only played three songs from the very good music - *Love in the Time of Gaza*, *Give Me the Wonder* and *Nyembezi (Tears)*. Too bad he gave "Human" short shrift.

Clegg provided a professorial feel to the night, which should not come as a surprise because he was lectured in social anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg for four years before giving it up to forge a musical career. While sometimes a tad too lengthy, Clegg did an excellent job in giving depth to the songs through the background information, expounding on everything from South African gold mines to the women's right to vote around the world (New Zealand was the first country to do so, according to Clegg).

Not everything was merely for educational purposes. In introducing one of the evening's highlights, *Bullets for Bafazane*, Clegg said the song was about his tour manager with Juluka, who also happened to be involved in possible assassinations in South Africa with another group opposed to his. Clegg humorously went on to say how the idea of having an assassin with the band did not sit well with the group, with Bafazane told he had to choose between the two.

Clegg has varied little in one area over the decades, and it's all to the good - he has a lot of vigor and is quite the dancer. He often mixed it up, dancing in lockstep with backing singer Mandisa Dlanga, adding a lot of energy to the proceedings.

The other band members meshed well with Clegg as well. Innes often added taut, steely guitar lines that have been part and parcel of the sounds of Clegg's various musical projects. Dan Shout also was standout on keyboards, but particularly his sax playing, which provided an added kick to the songs.

Then again, it's hard to fault Clegg for pulling out songs from varying parts of his three-decade long career. There's a lot there, and Clegg and band make it sound fresh.

Los Angeles Times



POP & HISS

THE L.A. TIMES MUSIC BLOG

South Africa's Johnny Clegg returns with first U.S. album in 17 years

October 29, 2010 | 10:24 am

When South African musician Johnny Clegg started playing music in earnest in the 1970s, he was something of a trendsetter, one who assembled an integrated band of white and black musicians at a time when his nation's government officially sanctioned racial segregation in the form of apartheid.

His blend of Western rock, *mbaqanga* African jazz-pop music, Zulu chants and choreography and multilayered vocal harmonies akin to those of Ladysmith Black Mambazo predated the incorporation of elements of traditional African music by such savvy world-music proponents as Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel and David Byrne.



But as Clegg anticipates this week's release of his first album in the U.S. in nearly two decades, "Human," he recognizes how much has changed, both at home and around the world. Apartheid, against which he often railed in his music, is no more. Nelson Mandela, who was a political prisoner during most of the time Clegg and his bands exerted their presence in the U.S. on tour and with a string of major-label albums, came and went as president of the Republic of South Africa. And the Western culture that was long suppressed during the apartheid era has flooded through his country.

"From 1994 to 2004, we saw this amazing influx of hip-hop, rap, dance and house music coming in and new styles of dress, a new youth culture, coming up into the townships -- and completely to the detriment of traditional rural music styles," Clegg, 57, said recently from his home in Johannesburg, South Africa. "All the traditional music forms and styles lost their [radio] airplay and now are relegated to 'traditional hour,' which is usually 3 a.m. in the morning."

That leaves Clegg, the onetime barrier bender who picked up a Grammy nomination for best world music album for his 1993 collection "Heat, Dust and Dreams," as something closer to a standard bearer.

"We're keeping a few things alive," said Clegg, who was born in England and raised in South Africa. "Things are slowly now changing a bit, but the traditional Zulu street guitar music I grew up with has all but disappeared, and the Zulu dancing also has disappeared. A lot of traditional African culture is disappearing as we become part of the global economy."

Some of it is very much evident on "Human," in the expansive vocal harmonies of the Soweto Gospel Choir that backs him on the anthem-like "Asilazi," the Zulu language he alternates with English in many of his lyrics and the skittering electric guitar lines and polyrhythmic beats that abound on the album.

This time out he's also expanded his signature sound to include some grunge-like guitar textures in "Here Comes That Feeling Again" and a pan-global Middle Eastern Afro-Cuban cumbia melange on "Give Me the Wonder."

"I've been a fan of Johnny's for years," said Jim Musselman, founder of the West Chester, Pa.-based Appleseed Recordings label that's issuing "Human" stateside. "He's been such an innovator in so many ways, integrating African rhythms with rock beats and African harmonies, putting all those things together and making it work in an incredible way. A lot of musicians have been very influenced by what Johnny did."

He's long been a political activist, paying the price with numerous arrests for violating the old laws that enforced segregation between the black and white populations. Because he also performed at each of Mandela's 46664 AIDS Awareness concerts, it's no coincidence one of his songs, "The Crossing (Osiyeza)," showed up in Clint Eastwood's 2009 film "Invictus," about the revolutionary changes in South African politics since Mandela was freed from prison in 1990. Mandela also was the subject of Clegg's song "Asimbonanga." On a lighter note, his "Dela" was featured prominently in the 1997 Brendan Fraser comedy "George of the Jungle."

But even though apartheid is officially a thing of the past in South Africa, equality and justice for all have been harder to come by. Clegg, however, believes there remains reason for cautious optimism.

"The language of South African politics is changing. It's moving away from liberation language to real politics of delivery of social services," said Clegg, who between tours used to teach anthropology at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He still lectures there and elsewhere, occasionally. "Our president [Jacob Zuma] did a fantastic job with the World Cup. South Africans amazed themselves. We know what we can do; it's a wonderful yardstick and barometer, to understand that we are capable of being an efficient, clear and powerful country."

The change is apparent in Clegg's songwriting as well. Where he often wrote in the past about the personal and social dynamics of the struggle for freedom and political equality, many of the songs on "Human" now center more on finding identity, understanding or love in a rapidly shifting landscape.

Clegg has toured regularly through Africa and Europe, and has built a loyal following in Canada that has brought him back to North America periodically. But playing in the U.S. has been a financially dicey proposition. Still, a cadre of followers in the states gobbled up tickets for his performance in New York next April when it was announced recently as part of a North American tour next spring. He expects to add a Los Angeles stop before his 2011 itinerary is finalized.

"We have to battle for support in the marketplace," he said. "The best thing we can do really is our live act A lot of kids today get up on stage with a backing tape and dance around a bit. But when audiences see our full band playing live instruments with a show that is so physical and energetic and uses the traditional dance and music forms, it's quite difficult for them to compete. We can still knock their socks off."

-- Randy Lewis

Photo: Johnny Clegg. Credit: Fiona MacPherson



Johnny Clegg Mixes Infuses Music With Anthropology

January 31, 2011

He is one of South Africa's celebrated sons. Performer Johnny Clegg is a singer, songwriter and dancer who might also be described, without irony, as an anthropologist and a musical activist. Host Michel Martin speaks with the man who popularized the fusion of Western pop and African Zulu rhythms about his latest CD titled "Human."

MICHEL MARTIN, host: I'm Michel Martin and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Coming up, my weekly Can I Just Tell You commentary about the calls for change in Egypt, but mostly about human dignity. But, first...(Soundbite of song, "Asimbonanga")

Mr. JOHNNY CLEGG (Musician): (Singing in foreign language)

MARTIN: That is Johnny Clegg singing a song he penned in 1986 for the then-imprisoned Nelson Mandela. Asimbonanga means: We have not seen him. In this 1999 performance, though, Johnny Clegg did see Nelson Mandela. He danced slowly but surely onto the stage accompanied by another singer and then demanded that band repeat this song to ensure that everybody heard it and was dancing.

Mr. NELSON MANDELA (Former President, South Africa): Well, it is music and dancing that makes me at peace with the world. (Soundbite of cheering)

MARTIN: That, again, was Nelson Mandela on stage with Johnny Clegg. He is a musician, dancer, Zulu scholar and human rights activist who has built a following in the U.S., Europe and around the world. And now there is a new CD, the first in quite a while - it is called, simply, "Human." And he's with us now from the studios of South Africa Broadcasting Corporation in Johannesburg. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us.

Mr. CLEGG: Thank you. Thanks a lot.

MARTIN: Retrospectives can be bittersweet. When you look back over the course of your career, you can enjoy sort of the moments where you think, wow, that was great, you know, I did that. But then sometimes there's a sort of a sadness that people aren't connecting to some of the things that you love in perhaps the same way that you wish they were. I'm thinking about the fact that I've seen you talk about in some interviews that some of the traditional music forms that you grew up with, Zulu dancing, a lot of that now is sort of being pushed into sort of the early morning hour of programming and things of that sort. Will you talk a little bit about that, if you would?

Mr. CLEGG: Yeah, sure. What happened, obviously, during the period of cultural segregation, I'm talking 40 years ago, is that a lot of the traditions were kind of frozen in their - in a kind of a cultural straightjacket, which had both a good and a bad aspect to it. The actual real raw mother lode of dance tradition and of course all the various styles of music whether it was concertina, guitar or violin, that has all disappeared. The hostels no longer have an incredible cultural carpet that they would throw out on the weekends onto the street. Also, the opening up of South Africa as an acceptable member of the family of nations globally, saw the end of the cultural boycott. And the generation that was born in the '80s, they said, you know, we want to take our rightful place in the global youth culture. And we're tired of being boycotted and we're tired of being this little sort of bad place where our music and our dance, it should be, you know, sort of segregated from the rest of the world. And we saw a flood of hip hop, rap, dance, house music coming to South Africa. And, slowly, you know, traditional music has really taken a backseat. And if you really...

MARTIN: Well, you can't object, though, to opening up to the world, right?

Mr. CLEGG: No. I - all I was noting was the fact that this music has disappeared. It's not that it's, you know, niche, it's actually, you don't see it anymore. It's hard to get a hold of. You know, I understand it's the way of the world. Things

change, things move on. And those traditions are things that shaped me. I'm really saying that what I was shaped by is now passing away. I still use those forms. I still celebrate those forms. And I still incorporate them into my music.

MARTIN: OK. Well, tell me about the new CD. What was on your mind as you were developing it?

Mr. CLEGG: Well, if you notice on the cover, we have these very extreme figures. It's an artist in South Africa who developed this style of carving and painting and creating these weird expressions of conflict and paradox in the human condition. And I think what - with "Human," the album - that its title. What "Human" is trying to do is to really look at more deeper issues of paradox. How do we deal with contradiction? How do we deal with conflict? Because it's out of those things that we are really shaped as individuals. And I think there's two or three songs on the album which look at some of the more darker aspects of those dynamics of being human.

MARTIN: Do you feel up to playing one for us?

Mr. CLEGG: Yeah. I can give you a traditional Zulu street song if you want, or I can give you a song from the album, "Love in the Time of Gaza."

MARTIN: Well, how about this, how about this: Since we were talking about the traditional Zulu songs, the music that has influenced you so profoundly, why don't you give us the traditional Zulu song first?

Mr. CLEGG: OK.

MARTIN: And then we'll give you a little bit of a rest, and then you can tell us about the second piece - which, is again, like, is another example of how you're continuing to sort of stay engaged in the world.

Mr. CLEGG: Yes.

MARTIN: OK?

Mr. CLEGG: Yeah. Cool.

MARTIN: So let's have the first one.

Mr. CLEGG: OK. (Soundbite of a guitar)

MARTIN: Tell us a little bit about it. OK.

Mr. CLEGG: This song, I like very much. The Zulu are a, you know, they're a military culture, and so they have many war songs, some of them very graphic. But this one is a song which has got this kind of paradox which I'm telling you is part and parcel of what I was exploring in the album "Human." It says that we are coming to attack a particular area. But then there's this kind of other appeal to say: But do you see our children? Do you see our young people who are still blossoming? Would you be so kind as not to hurt them at all? And it's one of the few songs which I discovered on the street which had this kind of paradox in it. So I'd like to play for you.

MARTIN: OK. Here it is. (Soundbite of music)

Mr. CLEGG: (Singing) (Foreign language spoken)

MARTIN: Thank you.

If you're just joining us, this is TELL ME MORE, from NPR News. I'm speaking with Johnny Clegg, the musician, songwriter, activist, and we're talking about his new CD, "Human," and whatever else is on his mind. You know, there's

<http://www.npr.org/2011/01/31/133374805/Johnny-Clegg-Mixes-Infuses-Music-With-Anthropology>

another song I wanted to ask you about. It's the first song on the CD, "Love in the Time of Gaza." Will you tell us a little bit about that?

Mr. CLEGG: Yeah. I was watching, in January last year, the aftermath of the Gaza attack. And I don't even know which program I was watching. I was lying in my bed and watching - idly looking at these pictures that were just, you know, quite shattering. And one of the interviewers is talking to a chap about a particular incident. And I saw, in the back, a young boy of about 17. And there's smoke rising around, and it was just carnage everywhere and helicopter gunships flying overhead. And he was looking at this girl. And she was shyly looking back, and he was - I could see that they weren't aware of the camera. They weren't aware of anything. They were actually focused on each other. And I thought that's an amazing moment, that in this time of absolute carnage, this young person is, you know, is interested in the girl.

I wanted to say something about that, but I didn't know how to do it. It came out much later, months and months later, where I was just standing and I was strumming in the studio, and I found this chord progression, which I like. And I found a melody, and then the line came out, ooh these are my father's people. And then this is where the human tree once grew. Sorry. We are the children of the new world. You've got a new dream pushing through.

And I realized that when I finished writing those four lines, that I was talking about that young guy. So it was, for me, a very powerful moment, because it's a very difficult subject to write about, you know, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And to find an angle which can just release something a lot more deeper and - of all this flat(ph), you know, that we get in the media. And so that song, that's how that happened.

MARTIN: Uh-huh. Well, thank you. Here it is: "Love in the Time of Gaza." (Soundbite of song, "Love in the Time of Gaza")

Mr. CLEGG: (Singing) I was born inside the rain on a day of wonder, dark inside my brain, memories of thunder. I was born a refugee, my life not fixed or free. I know the world's not to blame, 'cause everybody carries my name.//Ooh, these are my fathers' people. Ooh, this is where the human tree once grew. Ooh, we are the children of a new world. Ooh, we have a new dream pushing through.//The sky is black with gunships, but I'm dreaming of a girl. In her eyes love and friendship, but will she understand my world? Now I'm like a windswept sea, hope and fear crashing over me. Will she think my world is cruel when I share my point of view?//Ooh, these are my fathers' people. Ooh, we are the children of the new world. Ooh, this is where the human tree once grew. Ooh, we have a new dream pushing through.

MARTIN: Well, thank you so much for joining us, particularly after you've been working so hard. And it was really kind of you to come and spend some time with us.

Mr. CLEGG: Thanks a lot.

MARTIN: So before we let you go, what shall we bid farewell on? Is there a song from the album that you'd like us to play as we say goodbye?

Mr. CLEGG: How about "Give Me the Wonder"?

MARTIN: All right. "Give Me the Wonder." It's from Johnny Clegg's new CD "Human," and he was with us from Johannesburg. Thank you so much for joining us.

Mr. CLEGG: Pleasure. (Soundbite of song, "Give Me the Wonder") (Singing) Tell me new words and break this thirst. Sing me iron songs. Let me be strong. Give me right. Give me wrong. So I know where I belong. Give me dark. Give me light.

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Johnny Clegg Gets A Standing Ovation

By Paul Cashmere

Tue, 26 May 2009 12:58:41

It was interesting watching who came along to the Johnny Clegg show in Melbourne last night. It was not based on demographic, gender or nationality. Johnny Clegg has built a fan base from across the community.

To describe the music of Johnny Clegg as "world music" is somewhat, if not entirely, accurate. The Clegg sound is rooted in the sounds of Africa. After all, he earned the name 'The White Zulu' when he was still in his teenage years. However, Johnny Clegg has managed to mix Zulu rhythm with pop and rock to create his own sound. It was this Clegg sound that Paul Simon discovered and based his Graceland album on.

Clegg live is a interesting mix of music and culture. He connects with the head, the heart and the feet when he performs. By watching Johnny Clegg live, you learn a little about who he is and why he is along the way. You are also treated to around 2 hours of a 30 year career.



Johnny Clegg was born in London but migrated to South Africa when he was 6 months old. He sings about what he knows and what he has learned and shares that knowledge with his audience.

He played the concertina and explained its relevance to the African people. It was a simple instrument to play as they moved from town to town.

The cultural experience includes Zulu dancing with Clegg and dancer Sabelo Qoma. Sabelo is the son of Bafazana, Clegg's stickfighting mentor. Sabelo showcases the traditional dance of isishameni and umzansi in the show. With Sabelo, Clegg demonstrated the art of the fightingstick by way of dance.

Andy Innes is a former member of Suvuka. He is Clegg's musical director playing guitar and mandolin as well as vocals. He has played more than 200 cities in 28 countries in his time with Johnny Clegg.

The gem of the show is the extremely talented Mandisa Dlanga. Mandisa has toured and recorded with Clegg since 1986. She has also worked with Paul Simon, Simply Red and Jennifer Rush as well as South African stars Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba.

I'm not sure people were expecting to see such an energetic show. Clegg's tribal rhythms had them on their feet.

It has been nearly 4 years since Johnny Clegg last toured Australia. He promises to return in 2010.



JOHNNY CLEGG PRESS LINKS

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