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On Joyce's Descendants: The Politics of Gender in the South African Jazz Musical

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Abstract

King Kong: An African Jazz Opera (1959) marked a pivotal moment in the history of South African jazz. It placed on stage the rich panoply of South African jazz and popular musics that had been cultivated in black segregated townships since at least the 1920s. As an avowedly anti-apartheid and non-racial production, *King Kong* heroically challenged how urban black South Africans' lives and cultural practices previously had been represented to white South Africa. In place of the rural and the primitive, *King Kong* presented the urban and urbane; instead of 'African drums' and *ingoma* dancing, which were both popular as mine entertainment, *King Kong* presented black choral compositions alongside jazz, kwela and jive. Its protagonists spoke English and *tsotsitaal*, and the stories that the show's actors presented on stage were familiar: a love triangle and a tale of revenge. The entirety of the spectacle had a broader political aim: *King Kong* was meant to show that black and white artistic creators could collaborate, that white South Africans could enjoy a 'sophisticated' black show, and that black South Africans could compose, sing and act. In other words, *King Kong* sought to show how South African musical and theatrical cultures could be, if not for apartheid.

The production's progressive anti-apartheid politics did not extend to considerations of gender with equal singlemindedness, however, even though women are central to the *King Kong* story, and were central to the broader society the show aimed to represent on stage. The position of women in the jazz musical remains one of *King Kong*'s less examined aspects. This thesis revisits the 1959 production to engage this omission, using archival material – original manuscripts, programme notes and newspapers – as well as various recordings and scores of *King Kong*. Focusing on the show's cultural history, I argue that it is in the examination of the dynamics of gender that *King Kong*'s less heroic impact on the South African jazz musical may be gleaned. Embodied by the figure of Joyce, the politics of gender in *King Kong* distilled women's historical power struggles in South African jazz cultures. While South African jazz has changed since the late 1950s, women musicians in South African jazz cultures are, to a significant degree, still framed by the construction and reception of this figure. They are Joyce's descendants.