

South African musician Johnny Clegg brings his joyful sound to Zellerbach Theatre

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"The happiest music comes out of the toughest and saddest places," says Johnny Clegg, whose biracial bands and challenging lyrics made him a government target during the apartheid era.

by A.D. Amorosi, For The Inquirer

Johnny Clegg is used to getting up people's noses. If it wasn't because the white, British-born, South African activist/singer-songwriter stuck it to the government by fronting several biracial bands during the time of apartheid, it was because of Clegg's lyrics on songs such as "Impi" and "Gijim'beke."

From the 1970s through the '90s, Clegg, his various ensembles, and their blends of African Zulu rhythms and goopy pop were a voice of reason on apartheid. "I think we made an impact [then] just by mixing language and musical traditions into single songs where the cultural segregation policies of apartheid were challenged," Clegg said recently during an interview in advance of one of his now-rare U.S. shows, Sunday at Annenberg Center's Zellerbach Theatre.

"Then, we played those songs live and took them to the people when those same tunes were restricted or banned. Although 20 [percent] to 30 percent of our shows were closed by the police, we still got through and gave our audience a sense of what could be possible."

Because Clegg's father was a journalist, it's natural to assume that the younger Clegg may have inherited a journalistic sense of responsibility and moral imperative.

No, not at all.

"That's not the reason for what I do," he says. "I love traditional music forms and cross-pollinating them with other forms. That's a cultural imperative. I don't preach. I want to practice 'thick description' [an anthropological term for describing not just a single human behavior but also its context] in both the personal, private universe of being human, as well as the wider world. If at times it gets political, that's OK."

Apartheid officially ended in South Africa in 1994, after the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela and the lifting of the ban on the African National Congress (ANC). Clegg now sees his aesthetic responsibility to his adopted home as "examining the spaces that allow for conversation between the diverse cultures and races in South Africa." Recent albums such as *Human* and Appleseed label songs such as "Love in the Time of Gaza" and "The World is Calling" offer positive messages through whatever struggles are at hand.

What makes Clegg such an optimist?

"Everything comes to an end," he says. "All struggle finds its completion. The happiest music comes out of the toughest and saddest places - the *favelas* of Brazil, the townships of apartheid South Africa, and the ghettos of Haiti. Positivity is a celebration of human spirit and ingenuity, and, most importantly, humor.

"Humanizing oneself in dehumanized environments means not being down, but being up and bright and shiny and real."

The Johnny Clegg Band and Jesse Clegg, 7 p.m. Sunday at Zellerbach Theatre, 3680 Walnut St. \$55-\$25. 215-898-3900, annenberghcenter.org.

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