

Under African Skies: The story of the collaboration that became Graceland

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Under African Skies directed by Joe Berlinger

Under African Skies tells the story of Paul Simon's 25-year anniversary tour of South Africa to commemorate the release of his his album *Graceland* in August of 1986. Simon reconstitutes the personnel from the 1985 original recording sessions in 2011. The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival this year and was released by A&E Indie Films as a DVD and download on iTunes. It is currently available for free online streaming on a couple of sites.

Musically, the film is quite interesting. It recounts Simon's original inspiration for his trip to the then-apartheid state. He became so taken with the music on a cassette tape of the Boyoyo Boys he had been given by a friend that he began investigating the possibility of traveling to South Africa to record. A tune, "Gumboota," (Gumboots—what South African miners called the rubber boots they wore to work) particularly caught his attention.

The resulting 1985 trip to Johannesburg was an immediate source of controversy. Simon ran afoul of the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Nations cultural boycott of South Africa.

In many ways, *Under African Skies* is Simon's opportunity to tell his side of the story. The filmmakers had access to Simon throughout his visit. On-screen dialogues were staged with both his political friends and critics. An exchange unfolds throughout the film between Simon and Dali Tambo, son of ANC leader Oliver Tambo, becoming significant to the film's story.

Paul Simon's story of the creation of *Graceland* deserves telling. As soon as the idea of going to South Africa came to him, he understood that it would be controversial. After all, the cultural boycott of South Africa had been campaigned for by the ANC and its supporters, including the United Nations, since the 1960s, despite the fact that the US government under Reagan in the 1980s, considered South Africa an ally and the opponents of apartheid as terrorists.

Simon called his friend, singer Harry Belafonte, an outspoken opponent of racism and Jim Crow in the US and

an anti-apartheid activist, to discuss a collaboration with black South African artists. Belafonte was pleased with the idea, but advised him to check with the ANC. Simon chose not to do that for reasons which are explained during the course of the film.

The evolution of the music of *Graceland* has a rather complex backstory, which is depicted quite engagingly. The initial recording sessions in Johannesburg lasted only 10 to 14 days. During that time, Simon met and worked with The Boyoyo Boys, a band called Stimela, the core of which became the *Graceland* studio and tour band, General M.D. Shirinda and the Gaza Sisters, and finally Ladysmith Black Mambazo, with whom he had become familiar from the 1979 British documentary *The Rhythm of Resistance*. Simon was so impressed with the talent and passion of the South African musicians that he determined to do his best to produce music that was as at the highest level he could, not as political music, but as popular music, which is what he did best.

Simon relates especially being so bewitched with the beauty of the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo that he was totally intimidated. "They were so good at what they did and it was so contained that I didn't really know at the time how I could fit into their world or if they wanted me to," he explains. As it turned out, they collaborated remotely on a tune called "Homeless," of which Simon recorded some sketches on cassette after returning to New York and then sent to the group.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo's composer Joseph Shabalala wrote some variations based on his group's working out of musical ideas, and arrangements were made for the group to fly to Abbey Road Studios in London for a session to record "Homeless."

Another aspect of the making of *Graceland* was the sound engineering in the New York studio by Roy Halee, who spent many hours producing the tracks that would become the basis of the songs for the album. Simon, in turn, worked many hours writing the lyrics to fit the rhythm of the music. As he explains, this required much trial and error. As the

music was very sophisticated, so the lyrics had to be.

Ladysmith and Stimela's rhythm sections were sent to New York to finish work on the album. When the album's release was delayed by the studio for several months, the musicians were left in the awkward position of having to perform, for a national audience on NBC's Saturday Night Live, music that no one had ever heard. After a few moments of nervousness, the music was an instant success.

The 2011 footage from the anniversary tour is integrated seamlessly into the production to tell the story of the collaboration that became *Graceland*.

Peter Gabriel, the British popular musician who recorded the 1980 song "Biko," about Stephen Biko, the South African student leader brutally killed by the apartheid regime, praises the music of *Graceland* for its ability to synthesize American popular music with the music of southern Africa. He explains that *Graceland* helped people around the world to see that there was more to South Africa than suffering.

Under African Skies features comments from musicians Quincy Jones, David Byrne and Philip Glass. Paul McCartney explains how the Beatles brought African-American music back to America in their early music.

Whoopi Goldberg describes *Graceland* enthusiastically as a "perfect storm," being released at just the right moment, and "the instrumentation he used, that thing with the b-r-r-m-m-m b-r-r-m-m-m! I mean, come on! That was great!"

The most enlightening comments in the film are the ones from the African musicians themselves. Through the controversy during the original 1987 *Graceland* tour, they behaved with courage consistent with life under the apartheid state. At one point during the European part of the tour, the musicians were ordered by the ANC to return to South Africa. This enraged guitarist Ray Phiri, who told ANC representatives, "I am a victim of apartheid. It is not possible to victimize the victim twice!"

Simon states several times that he would not have been able to stand up to the constant pressure of protests and some cases of violence from organizations that insisted Simon was aiding apartheid, during the tour without the strength of Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, both exiled from South Africa.

Simon presents his defense from the standpoint that artists have the right to be "independent from politicians." In response to criticism from the ANC that "you didn't check with us," Simon retorts, "Is that the kind of government you're going to be? Will you check our lyrics? . . . Like so many others who fuck the artists?"

Belafonte is cited several times during the film. While he praises the music of *Graceland*, he attempts to express

Simon's position "that the artist is supreme and to go to any one group to beg the right of passage was against his instinct."

Recent events in South Africa demonstrate that a critical and historical approach is required. Leaders of the ANC, including Dali Tambo, whose rapprochement with Simon is a keynote of the documentary, have become wealthy and part of the new South African establishment, which is determined to ruthlessly defend its interests.

The controversy over the cultural boycott of South Africa has apparently dissipated. Yet those who are eager to embrace Simon today and "let bygones be bygones" now have blood on their hands. The apartheid state has been gone since 1994, but the struggle between classes rages on, not only in South Africa, but globally.

The boycott demand received support from millions around the world seeking a way to smash the apartheid regime. As far as the ANC was concerned, however, it was a means of regulating the struggle, seeking to mobilize liberal public opinion and pressure the major powers to isolate the regime, while preparing to replace it with a government equally committed to capitalist property and imperialist domination.

The film makes clear that Simon, while not putting forward any political conception of the struggle, correctly objected to the ANC's interference, and this clash, 25 years ago, foreshadowed subsequent developments, which have seen the ANC government loyally uphold capitalist property and most recently strike out brutally against striking miners.

Out of the *Graceland* experience, Paul Simon has rightly earned admiration. The music speaks for itself. The mass appeal of the album speaks to the optimism and generosity of the populace. The value of *Under African Skies* is that it documents the process and the talented people who worked to make it happen.



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