

Review

Marcel Weltak:

Surinamese music in the Netherlands and Suriname

Scott Rollins (trans)

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Reviewed by Corinna Campbell



In the foreword to the original Dutch publication of Marcel Weltak's *Surinamese music in the Netherlands and Suriname*, the late Dr. Lou Lichtveld speculates that the book was an outgrowth of the Dutch sentiment, *wachtensmoede*—tired of waiting. Lichtveld mourns how, “year after year so many (ear- and) eyewitnesses disappear from the stages and society, whose observations and memories remain unchronicled and the results of their professional experience lost forever” (xxxv). No doubt his dismay finds resonance among many fans of Surinamese music, who participate in a vast and vibrant music scene that has largely eluded scholarly recognition and critical study. Lichtveld concludes the foreword by suggesting that *wachtensmoede* may also serve as both a rationale and apology for the book's “sometimes fragmentary or incomplete contents”—better, in his estimation, to move forward and provide a record upon which others can build than to withhold what one has to share for its omissions or shortcomings. *Surinamese music in the Netherlands and Suriname*—an English translation of the earlier volume, now available via University of Mississippi Press (2021)—calls attention both to the necessity of filling such lacunae in the public record, and the challenges in doing so.

Journalist Marcel Weltak and his fellow chapter contributors undertook a daunting task in this slim volume: to provide an overview of Surinamese music as a whole—across genres and including contributions from the Amerindian, Creole, Maroon, Hindustani, and Javanese populations that form the basis of the national cultural narrative—from the colonial era to the present day, both in Suriname and among Surinamers in the Netherlands. It would be unrealistic to expect comprehensiveness. The book provides musicians and fans with ample opportunities to correct, debate, and to point out omissions. Nonetheless, it offers a welcome chance to take a broader view of Surinamers' musical engagements. Taken as a whole, the book effectively demonstrates a stunning variety of musical activity that can in some way be considered ‘Surinamese’, and gestures to musical circulations and interconnections that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Given such a diverse musical landscape, even the most ardent audiophile is bound to be more familiar with some of these musical roots and branches than others; there is much to gain from reflecting on the composite, and few available resources to aid in the task.

This is a re-issue of the initial 1990 publication, translated into English by Scott Rollins, with additional introductory content and expanded appendices and back matter. Those familiar with the original Dutch edition will find that the body of the book is not significantly revised or expanded, save for a short chapter on Surinamese classical music. The book is divided into two main parts, labeled Origins and Development, respectively. Each of these is parsed into bite-sized chapters lasting in general only a few pages, covering prominent styles or

individuals from across the musical landscape. Weltak is the book's primary author; chapter contributions are provided by Ponda O'Bryan, Dr. J. Ketwartu, Herman Dijo, and Guilly Koster—all active participants in the musical scenes on which they write. It bears reiterating that the body of the book retains its original historical vantage point— within Parts I and II, accounts of the 'present-day' date to 1990, with no citations or annotations added.

Translator Scott Rollins reports, "Weltak stated that the publisher's brief [to the original, 1990 publication] was to produce a book with a more popular "coffee table" feel to it, devoid of excessive footnotes and bibliography" (viii). The back matter to the 2021 edition (consisting of five appendices, two glossaries, and an extended bibliography) are clearly intended as a counterweight. Whereas the lack of explanation and citation in the text restricts one's ability to treat Weltak's book as an authoritative source, the additions to the back matter give the motivated reader ample leads to explore on their own. The bibliography constitutes a sizeable offering of scholarship pertaining to Surinamese music. It is easy to imagine what complications may have dissuaded University of Mississippi Press from releasing the cassette that accompanied the 1990 publication as a playlist or audio supplement, but the audio/visual and discographical resources are ample and wide ranging. I was glad to see some deeply influential but also controversial musicians included in the discography, even if they didn't make it into the book's text. Among them are John Touwslager (Papa Touwtjie), whose distinctive blend of dancehall and rap put its own Surinamese spin on themes of gangster identity and political corruption in the wake of the Interior War (1986-92), and the *kaseko/kaskawi* band Aptijt, whose album "Boeke" (2005) has ignited lively debate about sexual empowerment and respectability politics. Adding some annotations to explain how these and other artists relate to Surinamese music as a whole would enhance the discography, making it a richer and more user-friendly resource.

Given that the book's format leaves space enough for only a snapshot of each selected topic, invested readers can anticipate experiencing some frustration about the curatorial decisions made in the text. For me, Weltak's discussion of The Suriname Conservatory and his brief mention of the Maroon popular genre, *aleke*, illustrate the point. Roughly one page is devoted to the recently founded Suriname Conservatory, with nearly half of that space taken up with discussion of the challenges of its operation owing to its small size, and their need to supplement their in-person instruction with virtual lessons with musicians abroad. Hardly any attention is paid to the fact that there now exists a music institution that includes Surinamese musical traditions as a fundamental part of its core curriculum, or discussion of how they approach such a task. Especially considering the topic of the book, this seems like a missed opportunity.

Whereas the conservatory example can be attributed to our different narrative preferences, Weltak's statements about *aleke* are brief to the point of being misleading. Widely attributed to the Ndyuka Maroons, the popular music style *aleke* is the result of musical collaborations between Maroon and (predominantly) Creole laborers, particularly in the Cottica region of Suriname. It is a stylistic synthesis of many forms, including *loonseï*, *kawina*, and *maselo*, and has been a mainstay of the Maroon popular music scene since the late 1950s and early 1960s. No musical description or discussion of *aleke*'s founding is included in this book, except for its listing in the glossary of musical styles as: "Rootsy, drum-based music created by and for young Ndyuka maroons, descendants of runaway slaves living in the interior who moved to the coastal towns" (147). Its only mention in the body of the text occurs under the subheading, "Developments in Suriname since 1990," where Weltak alludes to innovations to the genre—undertaken by the Maroon cultural organization, Kifoko, as well as other (unnamed) musicians, the latter having "modernized *aleke*, mixing it with other genres. The most important new element in *aleke* turned out to be *kawina*, after all" (xx). No further explanation is given. These oversimplifications impede one's understanding of *aleke*'s many influences, musical features, and place in a musical chronology. This despite the substantive research on the genre by Kenneth Bilby, Andre Pakosie, and Andre Mosis, among others.

These two critiques are both drawn from Weltak's "Introduction to the new volume," but the underlying issues relating to structure and citation run throughout the book. Of course, all writing is a selective endeavour, but when space on the page comes at such a premium and existing resources are so scarce, each omission or choice in wording cannot but loom large. While this creates circumstances ripe for censure, critics (myself included) will do well to remember that extensive critique can do as much to starve a much-needed discussion as encourage it. It is far better to add one's own contributions to the conversation than to cut it short.

And indeed, this book has a lot to offer. For all the names I would have liked to see but didn't, there were many that I was unaware of but am glad to know. Interspersed with the expected historical information, definitions, and instrument classifications in the "Origins" portion of the book are some refreshing details. Herman Dijo's discussion of how Javanese indentured workers created their own gamelan made of iron will be of broad interest, as will be the influence of Trinidadian steel pan music on Surinamese gamelan playing. Weltak's writings on church music, choirs, and *bazuinkoor* ('choir of trumpets') is particularly rich in detail, addressing specific hymnals that were used and regional preferences regarding the language and musical setting of worship. Where they arise, such details are hidden gems, subtle enough that they are likely to escape musical

grand narratives, but potentially hugely beneficial for a musicologist or historian who is willing to jump down those rabbit holes.

Weltak's passion for Surinamese jazz shines through in the latter half of the book; interspersed with his own commentary are numerous quotes from archival sources and musicians who were active in this scene. Again, I was most taken with the details—how saxophonist Kid Dynamite's distinctive tone was produced on a nearly unplayable mouthpiece, for instance, or Eddy Veldman's method of transposing kaseko rhythms onto the drum set. Weltak's comments about past demands and racialized preconceptions within the Dutch music industry and their effect on Surinamese musicians offer considerable food for thought.

The last few years have seen a number of projects aimed at filling in the gaps in Suriname's musical history by highlighting various Surinamese cultural icons. The NAKS Afro-Surinamese cultural organization sponsors an annual exhibit of Surinamese icons; Weltak, Koster, and Robin Austin co-authored a book and CD set (In de Knipscheer and IKO Foundation, 2016) devoted to Suriname's musical torchbearers; Diedrik Samwel's publication *Sranan Gowtu: Iconen uit de Surinaamse muziek* (Nigh & Van Ditmar and Top Notch, 2015) is comprised of substantive biographical essays on musical icons including many discussed in this book. These, too, are helping to create a public record through which Suriname's musical history can emerge and gain focus. For all the advantages of a biographical format, *Surinamese music in the Netherlands and Suriname* remains an important counterbalance, through which musical scenes can be remembered as complex and deeply interconnected spaces that involve fans, critics, and industry personnel alongside musicians—full of supporting players as well as shining stars.

About the reviewer

Corinna Campbell is associate professor of music at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts (US). She is the author of *The cultural work: Maroon performance in Paramaribo, Suriname* (Wesleyan University Press, 2020), and winner of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Joann Kealiinohomoku Award for dance research for her essay "Modeling cultural adaptability: Maroon cosmopolitanism and the Banamba contest" in *Maroon cosmopolitics: Personhood, creativity, and incorporation*, edited by Olivia Da Cunha (Brill, 2018). Her research among the Suriname Maroons has addressed topics including music-dance interconnections, national and nationalist performance, and popular (re)presentations of 'traditional' genres, for instance in folkloric and competition settings.

