

Gage Averill, *A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

Review originally published in *Research in African Literatures* 32, no. 2 (summer 2001): 202-204

Gage Averill is a well-known authority on Haitian music, and *A Day for the Hunter, A Day for the Prey* will only enhance his reputation. Indeed, his knowledge of Haitian music history is amazing. The book, however, is not simply a history of twentieth century Haitian music: it is really a political history of Haiti as portrayed in music. Averill's exegesis is an all-the-more impressive achievement because of the extent to which he is able to ground the politics in the music. There are a number of excellent studies that present musical and social developments in more or less parallel narratives, a strategy most ethnomusicologists and many anthropologists find tenable for implying correlations. For Averill, grounding the politics means not referring his discussion to the lower classes but rather searching for actual determinative dynamics in the music. There will always be some people for whom such an objective is unachievable, but Averill certainly pushes the envelope as far as anyone I have seen. The introduction provides his justification for his approach. A tour de force, the introduction would well serve any student or scholar in ethnomusicology or any cognate field as a statement about the way contemporary ethnomusicologists try to discuss musical meaning.

By the same token, what is possible in a discussion of Haiti might not be as convincing in other places. The Haiti we visit in this book is a country of such cultural riches that incredible complexes of meaning can coalesce around numerous musical styles, extensive folkloric and proverbial erudition, Catholic and Vodou religious liturgy and symbolic imagery, ambiguities and puns in the use of French and Creole, and a heritage of coded class and racial distinctions. Within the context of this book, Averill portrays this cultural legacy as a record of intellectual and creative responses to issues of power, and Haitians come across as people deeply conscious of the intertextual possibilities within this legacy of kaleidoscopic signification. As such, it makes sense that artists and intellectuals could play the part Averill assigns them as "conscience of the people," and the broad need for a response makes sense as well. Unless one has actual experience, one would find it difficult to imagine how frustrating and annoying it is to live under oppression and stupidity. This abundant arena of metaphoric engagement is testimony to many Haitians' disgust and to their need to come to terms with their

difficult history. Although latent and applied violence remain as ever the foundation of power, even the ruling elites felt the need to participate deeply in this cultural complex — more deeply than we see in many other comparable situations — in order to support their authority.

Averill discusses four periods of twentieth century Haitian history with reference to the ways music served as a important medium for the characterization of social and political groups. These periods are the American occupation (1915-34) and its aftermath, the regime of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957-71), the regime of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (1971-86), and the period of various military rules up to the brokered return to Haiti of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1993. The four major chapters on these periods are framed by the noteworthy theoretical introduction and by an epilogue. The epilogue reaffirms Averill's purpose of portraying music as "a medium of the communication and negotiation of power," through which class relations can be seen in dynamic and complex patterns of influence, even when the relations seem at first glance to be those of domination and resistance. The chronicle is propelled by Averill's ironic narrative of musical production as a series of rejections, in which the music of the people in power is never the music of the oppressed people of the country. The politicians and other powerful people want to present themselves as being in touch with "the people" and bring them into the universe of discourse that surrounds the regime. They look to the culture of the lower classes in order to appropriate the trappings of "authenticity," which generally they identify with reference to whatever music the people are enjoying at the time. As soon as the people see what is happening, they change the discourse and change the music. New regimes also join the process of identifying themselves and justifying themselves by rejecting the music of the previous regime, as Baby Doc Duvalier did regarding his father's preferred music. As Averill's title suggests, the hunter and the prey take turns at the turntable, and Averill shows that a historical perspective allows us to see the degree to which the oppressed are continually redefining the cultural politics and self-presentations of the oppressors who are following their lead. The basic potential for all the discourse is somewhere behind the music within the indeterminate and frequently mixed up symbolic legacy of Haitian culture. At its most ironic, the process even allows the regime to sanction music that is criticizing it.

Averill's narrative is very rich and also very dense. Fortunately, he is a fine prose stylist, and the presentation is always clear. Nonetheless, although it might be possible to skim through the book, I expect that many readers will want to slow

down and enjoy the remarkable wit of the songs. I myself was particularly struck by the way cultural meanings were continually involuted by successive efforts to appropriate their substance. One fascinating example for me concerned Vodou and the consequences of the way in which Papa Doc Duvalier incorporated Vodou symbols as part of his regime's political character. We are used to linking an interest in tradition with notions of recovering one's roots within a search for authenticity, but Averill treats us to a profoundly ironic description of how Haitian intellectuals and musicians faced the problem of developing alternatives to what seemed the most authentic components of their African legacy. Nearly half a century ago, Haitian intellectuals were debating whether there was a relationship between *noirisme*, their version of *négritude*, and dictatorship.

I can recommend this book without reservation. Averill's research is meticulous and his presentation is thorough. He respects the intrinsic interest of his material while demonstrating the enhanced theoretical potential of his approach. A splendid job!