



HOËR INHEEMSE ALTERNATIEF: THE RISE AND RISE OF HILTON SCHILDER

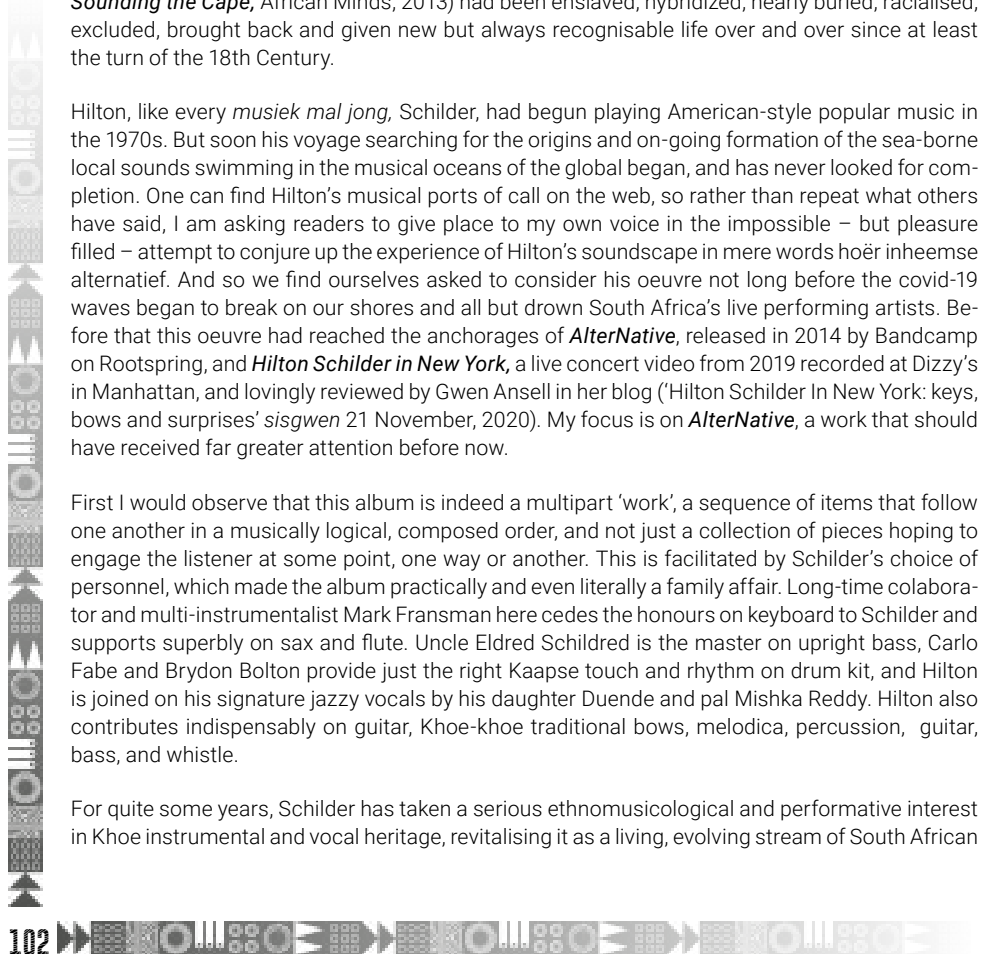
Reviewed by David B. Coplan is Professor Emeritus in Social Anthropology at the University of The Witwatersrand and is author of numerous publications.

I feel only gratitude toward the editors of *New Agenda* for asking me to write this appreciation of multi-instrumentalist Hilton Schilder. Of course this scion of the legendary Schilder family of songsmiths is anything but new on the agenda of Cape music practitioners and devotees. Hilton himself is at once a creator, recreator, and visionary of the future of the battered but always brave musical traditions of the fairest Cape. I first sat spellbound and heartfelt in small venues listening to him in his post-Genuines days in 1991, when I first lived in Cape Town. That was before I de-voured it's colonial history and testimony, and discovered that the unique Cape Sound was not merely being restored by Hilton and his *kamerade*. *Die Kaapse klank* (see Denis-Constant Martin's *Sounding the Cape*, African Minds, 2013) had been enslaved, hybridized, nearly buried, racialised, excluded, brought back and given new but always recognisable life over and over since at least the turn of the 18th Century.

Hilton, like every *musiek mal jong*, Schilder, had begun playing American-style popular music in the 1970s. But soon his voyage searching for the origins and on-going formation of the sea-borne local sounds swimming in the musical oceans of the global began, and has never looked for completion. One can find Hilton's musical ports of call on the web, so rather than repeat what others have said, I am asking readers to give place to my own voice in the impossible – but pleasure filled – attempt to conjure up the experience of Hilton's soundscape in mere words hoër inheemse alternatief. And so we find ourselves asked to consider his oeuvre not long before the covid-19 waves began to break on our shores and all but drown South Africa's live performing artists. Before that this oeuvre had reached the anchorages of *AlterNative*, released in 2014 by Bandcamp on Rootspring, and *Hilton Schilder in New York*, a live concert video from 2019 recorded at Dizzy's in Manhattan, and lovingly reviewed by Gwen Ansell in her blog ('Hilton Schilder In New York: keys, bows and surprises' *sisgwen* 21 November, 2020). My focus is on *AlterNative*, a work that should have received far greater attention before now.

First I would observe that this album is indeed a multipart 'work', a sequence of items that follow one another in a musically logical, composed order, and not just a collection of pieces hoping to engage the listener at some point, one way or another. This is facilitated by Schilder's choice of personnel, which made the album practically and even literally a family affair. Long-time collaborator and multi-instrumentalist Mark Fransman here cedes the honours on keyboard to Schilder and supports superbly on sax and flute. Uncle Eldred Schildred is the master on upright bass, Carlo Fabe and Brydon Bolton provide just the right Kaapse touch and rhythm on drum kit, and Hilton is joined on his signature jazzy vocals by his daughter Duende and pal Mishka Reddy. Hilton also contributes indispensably on guitar, Khoe-khoe traditional bows, melodica, percussion, guitar, bass, and whistle.

For quite some years, Schilder has taken a serious ethnomusicological and performative interest in Khoe instrumental and vocal heritage, revitalising it as a living, evolving stream of South African





music flowing into 'our kind' of Cape jazz. These experimentations have had a serious and salutary influence on other outstanding Cape musicians, such as piano wunderkind Kyle Shepherd.

AlterNative begins with an eponymous track 'Alter Native', that can only be categorized as Kaapse, and it is movingly sweet and lowdown. Sounds from nature, as of distant thunder in the bergs, underly serial interventions on flute, Khoë (!Xam) language vocables, struck bows, and melodica to lay the groundwork for the album's sonic tapestry as a whole.

'Aiden Part 2' is a slow homage to the Cape's signature goema (ghoema) hand drum rhythm, full of the melancholy wistfulness of the old songs, featuring a lead refrain on melodica and sax, and bridged by a powerfully restrained and melodic solo by Fransman on sax. 'Cole Part 3' opens with a bouncing counterpoint on multiple struck bows, followed by a Cape melodic solo on acoustic piano in the mode made famous by Abdullah Ibrahim, backed up with brushes and high hat. 'Are You Prepared' shifts the mood with a stunning jazzy vocal by father and daughter Schilder backed by guitar, soft drums and a bass riff so low it resonates below the clef.

The emotion projected through the tonality floats in the being of the listener for a very long time after. 'Ostrich Love Dance' is a jazz horn and keyboard chorus skillfully blended with acoustic percussion instruments from Khoi-San traditions. It evokes San mimetic animal dances in the style innovated by Schilder in his 2006 album recorded by the sadly short-lived ensemble Rock Art, called appropriately *Future Cape*. 'Tesna' is a melodious piano piece echoed by whistling it an octave higher, over 'township jive' drum rhythms with their feel of an 8/8 time signature on the high hat. 'Marco's Polo' is an up-tempo contemporary jazz composition that appears to feature all of the instruments mastered by this ensemble. It is driven by amazing, rapid hand percussion and rhythmic pyrotechnics on the bow that might have astonished the ancients who invented it. 'Standing Rock' is also driven by this rhythm, from the bottom by hand percussion, a mouth lamelophone or 'jaw harp', and the melodica, all supporting a dark twilight zone vocal on the subject of the cataclysmic arrival of the Dutch in 1652. As the coda, 'Use Your Mind' provides a ballad sung by the three vocalists backed by an austere solo piano melody. Here the skies finally open with lyrics that urge the listener to employ the only instrument that can deliver true freedom: the mind.

The album is for me of course enhanced by my experience of Hilton Schilder the man: great-hearted, humorous, modest, cerebral, patient, compulsively musical. I will give but one example. When Hilton was fighting for his life against cancer of the kidney, friends and family organized a series of concerts by his close colleagues to defray his medical expenses. At the one I attended, Hilton himself appeared on stage and played piano for us in his own cause. And then survived and recovered to make music for us these past 15 years, from the Cape to far-off New York. Take a bow, beloved maestro and lovely man.