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Freelance writer

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Paul Simon's *Graceland* Turns 25 -- Part Three: The Boycott

Posted: 06/10/2012 12:36 pm

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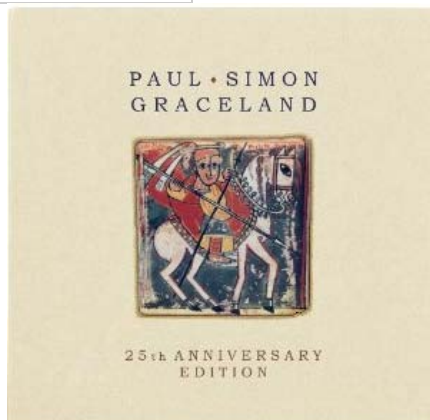
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PAUL SIMON: GRACELAND 25TH ANNIVERSARY

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Paul Simon's album *Graceland* has turned 25 sounding better than ever. Its impact on music and culture is vast and any list of the best albums of all time looks silly if *Graceland* doesn't appear on it somewhere. The best selling solo album for an artist who continues to produce great music, *Graceland* is a landmark, but not one that has grown dusty with Importance. It's not just a "significant" work with historical meaning; it's also an exhilarating collection of songs as timeless and current as ever. This is the third of a four part series covering the boxed set, its cultural impact, the story of the boycott and the music itself. You can buy the album in any configuration from [Paul Simon's website](#) or any major outlet.

Part One: The Boxed Set Review

Part Two: The Cultural Impact

Part Three: The Boycott

Part Four: The Album, Track By Track

GRACELAND: THE BOYCOTT

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Luckily, Paul Simon had no good intentions when launching into what would become *Graceland*. Maybe that's why it turned out so well. Paul Simon did not set out with the intention of highlighting the evils of apartheid. Simon didn't set out to shine a spotlight on the South African government that oppressed most of its people. He certainly didn't set out to write a protest song about life in Soweto. Heck, he didn't even set out to nobly embrace the "authentic" artists of that country and give them a platform to reach the world.

Paul Simon simply became obsessed with some music and determined to meet the artists that had created it and collaborate and see what happened. That's all. Joe Berlinger's documentary *Under African Skies* spells out better than ever before exactly what happened.

Simon was handed a cassette of music from South Africa which contained the instrumental song "Gumboots" by the Boyoyo Boys. (I'm still not clear if this was a mixtape someone created on their own, an album of music solely by the Boyoyo Boys or a legitimate compilation including multiple artists.) Simon couldn't stop listening to it and ultimately started writing lyrics to go along with the track, something he'd never done before in his life. He wasn't even sure who had created the music or whether they were still alive or could be tracked down. But he had to find out more. That led to him reaching out and establishing contact with various people familiar with the music scene in Soweto. That led to a flood of more music, the best that South Africa had to offer. The more he listened, the more excited Simon became.

Thank goodness, because after almost 20 year of uninterrupted artistic praise and commercial success, Simon was at a rare low point. He rather disingenuously says in the film that the commercial failure of his 1983 album *Hearts And Bones* was fine by him -- it meant his record label suddenly wasn't standing over his shoulder watching everything he did. It seems unlikely that Warner Bros. immediately considered one of their premiere acts to be washed up. And *Hearts And Bones* wasn't an isolated incident.

In 1980, he wrote and starred in the film *One Trick Pony*, a flop on every level that produced a soundtrack that surprisingly was also poorly received. Simon surely imagined that the soundtrack was one aspect of the film he didn't have to worry about. ("Late In The Evening" has proven the most enduring tune from it.) It wasn't simply that the movie did not do well. It was an almost embarrassing failure, especially for an artist who had gone from strength to strength for so long. (Simon would repeat the experience to a lesser degree on Broadway with *The Capeman* in 1997; that music would flourish in a concert setting years later.) He followed this failure with *Hearts And Bones*, which originally was going to reunite him with Art Garfunkel. At the last minute, he erased Art's vocals and it became another solo album, the first release of Simon's career not to go gold. For an artist used to Grammy awards and hit singles, his career in the past decade since the peak of *Still Crazy After All These Years* was surely disheartening. Feeling a glimmer of artistic rebirth was exciting and -- let's be fair -- launching into such a crazy, unusual project that upended his entire creative process must have been scary and exciting in equal measures.



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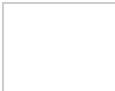
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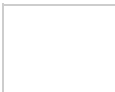
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But Simon wasn't willing to just recreate the music with studio musicians in New York. He wanted to go to South Africa and get in the studio with these artists, meet them on their own turf as it were. Was this even possible? First he made contacts to figure out who the acts were and whether they would be available. As you can imagine, when an act in Soweto that wasn't even that hot a commodity locally was approached by one of the most famous artists in the world, why yes, they were available.

What about the boycott? Simon went to his friend Harry Belafonte and the singer/actor/activist spelled out exactly what he needed to do. Simon needed to approach the African National Congress (ANC) and get permission to do what he wanted. Belafonte immediately sensed Simon resisted, though Simon didn't tell him so. Go to a political group and get "permission" to make music? That didn't sound like something he wanted to do, his Sixties knee-jerk resistance to authority kicking in at the mention of needing "permission" to make music. In one of the film's most amusing passages, Simon describes what he later did as like a teenager who is told he can't use the car, but he has a date and *really* wants to use the car and goes ahead and does it anyway.

So Simon approached the artists via the musicians' union in South Africa and asked them directly. Simon says at one point in the film that he was invited to South Africa but the truth is that he *asked* to be invited. The union met and took a vote and gave its approval for Simon to come and record. That was good enough for him, though he knew it wouldn't be good enough for Belafonte and purposefully said nothing about ignoring the ANC. In effect, Simon did indeed break the cultural boycott intended to isolate the South African government and avoid anything that might legitimize the system of apartheid.

He went to South Africa and recorded for about 10 to 12 days. The basis of a studio group was formed and those musicians would become the core of his touring group for decades to come. In another very revealing passage, Simon says the initial recording session with the Boyoyo Boys was disheartening. Whether due to nerves or whatever, they couldn't deliver musically. One of the white studio engineers dismissively said in effect, see? They say they can do it but they're really not technically up to it. Simon was dumbstruck by the comment, which seemed so condescending, but he also candidly admits he let it color his thinking.

In fact, when he moved on to another musician and tried to record guitarist Ray Phiri, Simon was so wary of Phiri's skills that he discouraged Phiri from doing anything fancy. Let's just try and get the basic track down, he said whenever Phiri suggested an idea. They did it straightforwardly but Phiri kept asking to do overdubs. Simon relented and Phiri dazzled him with his technical skills and artistic ideas; he immediately recognized Phiri for a world class talent. (Phiri still tours and records with Simon to this day.) Simon then understood anew how poisonous prejudice can be and how he'd been momentarily sucked into believing something negative about the musicians he'd traveled the globe to work with.

The core of those 12 days of jamming and recording were taken back to the US and transformed over time into the music of *Graceland*. Despite knowing he'd broken the boycott and ignored Belafonte's advice, Simon was astonished by the controversy that ensued when the album was released. He was just trying to create some music and couldn't everyone see how terrific it had turned out?

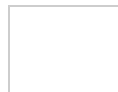
It wasn't as if Simon had played the segregated crowds of Sun City and cashed a big check, for god's sake. He had asked permission of the musicians of South Africa, received it, paid them triple the studio rates that musicians received in New York City and shared more songwriting credits than he'd ever done before in his entire life. (Five of twelve songs featured co-credits.) He toured around the globe with those very same artists and introduced their talents to the world, especially Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Heck, his tour even (wisely) included Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, two exiles from South Africa who had been shining a spotlight on the cruelty of apartheid for decades. Their anti-apartheid credentials placed them on the same level as Nelson Mandela as far as international visibility was concerned. If they supported Simon, how could anyone object?

Here are Simon and Miriam Makeba performing "Under African Skies" live in concert. On the album, the duet is performed with Linda Ronstadt.

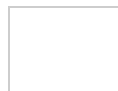
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But object they did. College students in the film are seen foolishly suggesting Simon couldn't possibly collaborate with black musicians in South Africa, implying he could never "understand" them because he was white. Besides, they said, the process would also be colonialism or otherwise tainted in some way. Spokespersons for the ANC and the boycott, especially the thoughtful Dali Tambo (prominently featured in the film) said no matter how good the music, no matter how well-intentioned, a boycott is a boycott and Simon should have honored it.

Of course, the failure of the ANC to deal with this particular action was influenced by the fact that Simon had ignored them, gone behind their backs and broken the boycott. They were incapable of making any distinction between profiting from breaking the boycott and doing what Simon had done: employing people, working with them, performing on stage with them throughout the world and putting a face on the pain of apartheid while humanizing and celebrating the people who suffered under it. *Graceland* inspired thousands of news articles and conversations about conditions in South Africa and turned its people from victims to humans worthy not just of dignity and respect (as all humans deserve) but also artists deserving of adulation and praise.

When boycotters tried to insist that the musicians not tour with Simon, the idiocy of their stance became clear. Yes, Simon had done a run-around of their authority, but it was crazy not to recognize a fait accompli and make the best of it. Tell musicians desperate for work not to leave South Africa and go on a concert tour with one of the most famous artists in the world, an artist who was calling attention to apartheid and celebrating their music every step of the way? How could that possibly make any sense or hurt the cause of fighting apartheid in any way? The film is gracious to all sides but it can afford to be: once Nelson Mandela was released, he and the ANC ultimately invited Simon to perform in South Africa as part of the celebration of victory. Vindication doesn't get much better than that.

Here is Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo performing "Diamonds On The Soles Of Her Shoes" on *Saturday Night Live*. One of the key songs on the album, it was added at a late date when LBM were in New York City recording in the studio. The album release was delayed to the fall by Warner Bros. but Simon was already booked to go on *SNL*. The documentary film *Under African Skies* details how they went on the show performing a several tracks long before anyone could hear the music on the radio or buy the album. The audience response was ecstatic. it was the first indication that after a decade of seeming lost artistically (though *Hearts & Bones* is a very good collection of songs) that Simon was not simply back on track but on the verge of the greatest success of his solo career. This performance is one of the bonus features on the DVD.

Tomorrow: The Album, Track By Track

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz was provided with a free copy of the deluxe boxed set with the understanding that

he would be writing a review.

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If you were to ask me, "How does that work?" I would say "It's all musical affinity," and it's very hard to explain why you're on somebody else's wavelength.

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"Paul Simon simply became obsessed with some music and determined to meet the artists that had created it and collaborate and see what happened." As he had done previously with reggae music ("Mother and Child Reunion", recorded in Jamaica) and American gospel (Love Me like a Rock, featuring the Dixie Hummingbirds), having first looked beyond contemporary pop and folk for inspiration before he went solo with Peruvian Andes music: "El Condor Pasa (If I Could)". As he did after with Brazilian/Latin Afro-rooted music with the album "Rhythm of the Saints", etc.

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freelance writer

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Absolutely. As I mentioned in an earlier section, he'd been doing this all his career. I was going so long I didn't go into all the examples (or the very friendly lawsuit over El Condor Pasa which was not an old folk tune as Simon was told but an original penned in the early 1900s.

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DVDs: Strippers, Miners and the Twee Wes Anderson Strikes Again**Michael Giltz**, 10/25/12*Freelance writer*

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Anderson's sensibility tiresome and twee or you used to like it but can't bear the cult of personality around his body of work or you're in all the way. I'm in all the way.

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Batman: The Dark Knight Returns' Bruce Timm and Andrea Romano: Cinefantastique's New York Comic Con 2012

Dan Persons, 10/25/12
Film Journalist

Of the seminal works that helped rescue Batman from the depths of camp, none may be more influential, or controversial, than Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*.

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When I Saw You: Could This Palestinian Film Win the Next Foreign Language Oscar?

E. Nina Rothe, 10/25/12
Global Culture Explorer

In 2013 the Palestinian state may acquire non-member "observer state" status at the UN. This coming year could also see the first Palestinian entry on an Oscar short list and quite possibly an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film.

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Why Isn't John Hawkes a Household Name Yet?

Annette Bourdeau, 10/25/12
Entertainment Reporter

He's been nominated for an Academy Award and several SAG honors. He's won a host of other high-profile prizes, including an Independent Spirit Award for his chilling performance as a badass meth addict in *Winter's Bone*. He's been in everything from *Wings* to *The Perfect Storm* to *Deadwood*.

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Fifth Place (Out of Four): The Decline of NBC Thursdays

Mark Lashley, 10/25/12
Writer and Ph.D. candidate

For reference, there are only *four* major American broadcast networks that air their programming in the English language. So this is quite a decline for an evening of entertainment that was, for years and years, home to the most popular and acclaimed shows on television.

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Review: Cloud Atlas Says Little But Does So Beautifully

Scott Mendelson, 10/25/12
Film critic at Mendelson's Memos, Valley Scene Magazine

It is a visually glorious and occasionally powerful achievement that, if possible, should be seen in its IMAX format. To use a cliché suited to the film, *Cloud Atlas* reaches for the moon yet ends up in the stars. But what beautiful stars they are.

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Chatting With Peter Frampton, Bruce Hornsby and Mike Andrews

Mike Ragogna, 10/25/12

Radio Personality on Solar Powered KRUU-FM, Music Biz Vet

"I always try to make stuff that affects me and I think that if given the chance, a lot of music that doesn't seem like the formula of what might be a hit would be more popular. There's a lot of great music that doesn't sound like whatever. Everything sounds very dance-y now."

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Precious Star Gabourey Sidibe's Monday-Brand Confidence

Lauren Berninger, 10/24/12

Founder, Finding the Fabulous

It took Gabourey Sidibe 21 years to decide to be confident.

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Oscar-Winning Screenwriter Brings LGBT Activism to 2012 Election

Shira Lazar, 10/25/12

Co-founder, WhatsTrending.com

It's a meeting of the Lances here as Oscar-winning *Milk* screenwriter and Prop. 8 play *8* creator Dustin Lance Black sits down with guest host Lance Bass to chat about working on the J.J. Abrams-produced film, *Earthquake*, and thoughts on the upcoming presidential election.

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Album Review: Kendrick Lamar's good kid, m.A.A.d city

Rap Genius, 10/25/12

The Internet's premier hip-hop lyrics website

On GKMC, Lamar's vernacular remains rich with swagger and his unordinary yet on point internal rhymes maintain to freely roll off his tongue.

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The First Time I Heard The Smiths

Lou Rhodes, 10/25/12

Singer/songwriter

Raised on my mother's transatlantic '70s folk collection, I'd never heard lyrics so unashamedly flippant; a 1980s Oscar Wilde, Morrissey seemed to convey the vacuous concerns of youthful beauty in a wonderfully ironic and self-deprecating fashion.

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Celebrating New York's Abingdon Theater: 20 Years of Innovative Artistry -- and a Salute to the Legendary Broadway Press Agent, Shirley Herz

Liz Smith, 10/25/12

Columnist

It won't be a surprise when the Abingdon Theater's mission to produce new plays by American playwrights turns 20 years old right this very year. And, next Monday night, this company, which has produced 77 unique shows, will be awash in stars.

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3 New Fascinating Horror Film Factoids!

Dr. Franklin Ruehl, Ph.D., 10/25/12

Host, 'Mysteries From Beyond the Other Dominion'

A surprising true story was incorporated in *The Masque of the Red Death*! The stars of *The Gorgon* hated the creature! Color mitigated the horrific effects of *I Was A Teenage Frankenstein*!

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The Machine That Made the Media

Patrick Myles, 10/25/12

Freelance art director and graphic design consultant

Linotype: The Film is a fascinating tribute to an invention that heralded the dawn of mechanical typesetting and played a pivotal role in the advancement of print and publishing.

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Review: *Fun Size*

Marshall Fine, 10/25/12

Author and film critic, hollywoodandfine.com

Imagine investing the price of a movie ticket in as many fun-size candy bars as that sum will buy -- and then eating them all in one sitting. Imagine how you would feel -- and it would still be better than how you feel after sitting through *Fun Size*.

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Tour Diary: #3

Diamond Rings, 10/25/12

Artist, musician

And How Did He Wind Up Playing Q In 'Skyfall'?

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'I Just Wanted To Create'

An Intimate Evening With Kanye West

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Big Change For Oscar Favorite?

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Colbert Offers Trump \$1M To Put His Balls In His Mouth

Taylor Swift, Conor Kennedy: It's Over

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PHOTOS: Nicole Scherzinger Wows As Sexy Vampire

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Lisa Ling is Pregnant!

[Comments \(124\)](#) | [Celebrity Couples](#)

Justin Timberlake And Jessica Biel Share Wedding Photo

[Comments \(83\)](#) | [Jessica Biel](#)

PHOTO: Kim Kardashian Does The Subway Diet

People always ask if I have a favorite place to perform on tour and I honestly don't. Anywhere (even nowhere) can be special, and getting the opportunity to play some of the smaller American spots has only reaffirmed my opinion.

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The Search for the Real -- October

James Franco, 10/24/12

Actor and author

The *New York Post* has been sniffing around for academic gossip because they can't write about me stumbling out of clubs. I think my class's collaborative film *Tar* says it all: They can kiss my ass.

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Bond at 50: Skyfall's Notable Premiere Harkens Back to Bond's Late Imperial Beginnings

William Bradley, 10/24/12

Political Analyst, NewWestNotes.com

The Bond film franchise returns to celebrate its 50th anniversary with *Skyfall*. Daniel Craig is the best actor to play Bond. He is highly credible in the action sequences, while bringing depth, darkness, decency and a dry humor to the role.

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Emily VanCamp's Revealing Getup

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PHOTO: Kimye Strike A Pose

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