



McPhee, Colin (1900-1964)

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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Canadian-born composer Colin McPhee not only helped preserve the musical traditions of Bali but also incorporated non-Western musical styles into his own compositions, a practice that influenced other North American composers.

McPhee was born in Montreal on March 15, 1900, but spent most of his youth in Toronto. He received his early musical education in Toronto and at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

In 1924 McPhee went to Paris to pursue his musical studies and his career as a pianist, but made little headway. After a year and a half he returned to North America to participate in the musical life of New York City--then an exciting center of modern music. Charles Ives, Edgar Varèse, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Carlos Chavez were a few of the composers then contributing to the musical life of the city.

Sometime during the late 1920s, "quite by accident" McPhee happened to hear recordings of the gamelan music of Bali. "[A]s I played them over and over," he wrote, "I became more and more enchanted I returned the records, but I could not forget them." He decided that he must travel to Bali to see the gamelan for himself.

Around the same time, McPhee met Jane Belo, who had studied anthropology and who was also interested in traveling to Asia. Although he was actively homosexual, McPhee and Belo were soon involved in an intense sexual relationship. They were married in 1930.

Belo was aware of McPhee's homosexuality, but she felt that a relationship with "a feminine man" was an important stage in her emotional development, and that it also revealed "aspects of masculine protest and narcissism" on her part.

In 1931 McPhee and Belo traveled to Bali. Once there McPhee immersed himself in an exhaustive study of the Balinese gamelan--a percussion orchestra with delicately layered textures and clangorous sounds. He carefully studied how the instruments--gongs and bells, wooden xylophones, skin drums and bamboo flutes--were made as well as how they were played. He also carefully notated the melodic and percussive possibilities of every gamelan piece he heard.

McPhee's research played a very important role in the preservation of the Balinese gamelan musical tradition, which was slowly dying. His musicological work *Music in Bali* (1966) is still the standard textbook at Bali's Conservatory of Music and Dance.

Since the Balinese were relatively tolerant of homosexuality, McPhee also soon threw himself into the sexual exploration of Balinese men. His sexual involvements with Balinese men led eventually to a separation from Belo.

McPhee wrote to one friend, "I was in love at the time with a Balinese, which she knew, and to have him



Colin McPhee in 1935.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, April 4, 1935.
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continually around was too much for her vanity. So it ended as I had foreseen at the beginning"

McPhee was able to live in Bali only because Belo had the money (which came from her family and her wealthy ex-husband) to do so. They were divorced in 1938 shortly before they both left Bali.

After almost seven years in Bali, McPhee returned to New York in 1939. Even before leaving Bali, he had begun to compose music that was an imaginative hybrid of Balinese and western traditions.

His most important musical piece in this vein is his orchestral suite, *Tabuh-Tabuhan*. Composed in 1936 as a concerto for two pianos and large orchestra, it combines Balinese and jazz elements in the American style of Copland and Thomson. It premiered in Mexico City in 1936 under the baton of fellow composer Carlos Chavez; it received a standing ovation, but then languished without another performance until thirteen years later.

McPhee's next two decades in New York City were marked by financial hardship and slowly improving fortunes. In 1960 McPhee moved to Los Angeles, and spent the last four years of his life teaching ethnomusicology and composition at UCLA. After two years of steadily deteriorating health from cirrhosis of the liver, he died on January 7, 1964.

McPhee's life is notable for three major achievements. Most important is that his musicological research on the gamelan helped to preserve Bali's musical traditions and contributed to the revival of what had been a dying musical practice.

Second, *Tabuh-Tabuhan*, his great work of musical synthesis, introduced a compositional style that incorporated non-western musical traditions into western concert music.

Third, through his writing, his musicological research, and his example as a composer, McPhee helped to shape an entire American musical tradition carried on by composers such as John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Steve Reich.

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About the Author

Jeffrey Escoffier writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.