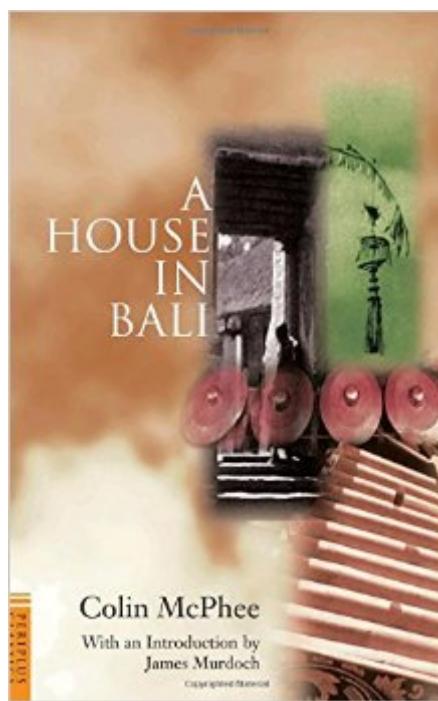


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A House In Bali



Synopsis

This is a book about passion, obsession and discovery in an amazing land, but also about the voyage of a highly talented composer and writer. *A House in Bali* remains one of the most remarkable books ever written about the fabled island of Bali. This classic book tells the story of Balinese culture through a history of Balinese music. First published in 1947, it tells the story of the writer and composer Colin McPhee's (1900-64) obsession with a music once unknown to the West, and of his journey to Bali to experience it firsthand. In 1929, the young Canadian "born musician chanced upon rare gramophone recordings of Balinese gamelan music which were to change his life forever. From that moment, he lived for the day when he could set foot on the island where the clear, metallic music originated. He was able to realize his dreams and spent almost a decade there during the 1930's. Music of Bali and dance, as McPhee discovered to his delight, are second nature to the Balinese, and his subsequent writings and compositions proved seminal in popularizing Balinese gamelan music in the West. In *A House in Bali*, McPhee unfolds a beguiling picture of a society long established, staggeringly poor in Western terms, but rich beyond belief in spiritual values and joy. The young composer writes about his discoveries of music in Bali and growing understanding of an astonishing culture where the arts are a prime preoccupation, and of the arts, music is supreme. Much has been written on Bali, but this classic work from 1947 remains the only narrative by a Western musician.

Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd. (May 15, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 9625936297

ISBN-13: 978-9625936291

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (19 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #534,947 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #171 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Ethnic & International > Ethnomusicology #250 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Country & Folk #263 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Folk & Traditional

Customer Reviews

I am Balinese and live in Ubud, about 10 minutes walk from where Colin McPhee stayed, when he came to Bali in 1931. My aunt worked for him. He heard a record of gamelan music in New York and couldn't wait to get to Bali to listen to the real thing. He stayed in Bali for almost 8 years and set about documenting gamelan music. Much of his research was carried out in a village near Ubud where my Villas are. There are still old people in the village who remember him. His book is beautifully written and tells stories of his adventures and life in the village and his encounters with the local Balinese. It's not necessary to understand technical music matters to enjoy this book - it is totally accessible. Highly recommended.

Ever since I visited Bali in 1997, I've been hooked on anything Bali--gamelan music, the wayang puppets, the masks, the smell of kretek (I don't smoke) and incense, frangipani flowers,... even the sputtering sound of motorcycles! I got my hands on all the National Geographic issues on Bali I could lay my hands on in second-hand bookshops. When I found this book, I was almost certain I wasn't going to be disappointed. I was right. Consider, for instance, the blurb at the back of the book: "The graveyard, moreover, was a natural meeting-place for witches and sorcerers, for every village had its suspects, owneres of books of spells that enabled the reader to change himself into a leyak--a ball of fire, a giant rat, or even a riderless motor cycle that travelled backwards. In this magic state sorcerers were indeed dangerous; they could send a man out of his wits or bring him to a lingering death." Written by a musician, it doesn't fare so badly as a literary read. It captures the magic, mysticism, and soul of a place. A Bali experience is a sensory overload. Colin McPhee happily immersed himself in it and did a very impressive job.

Colin McPhee was a young American composer, just out of college in the early thirties when he heard a recording of Bali's unique gamelan music. Having time and (apparently) money, he traveled to the island, lived there for several years and studied the music. The book is a warm-hearted account of the people he knew, their lives and their music. Anyone thinking of a trip to Bali or just curious about the Balinese and their music must read this classic. Unfortunately, it is currently listed as not in stock by the publisher. If we pester them enough, perhaps they will print more.

Even as the art & tradition of classical gamelan music fades in Java, gamelans are built & organized in America & Europe, the music is studied & taught in universities. This has occurred since the 70's, when recordings of gamelan music became widely available, particularly in a major series on Nonesuch Explorer. For many people, hearing gamelan for the first time is not only a delightfully

exotic experience, the music unlike anything one has heard, but there is often also a strange shock of recognition, as if one somehow already knew the music, although where & how remains a mystery. Perhaps this is what happened to Colin McPhee. For McPhee in 1930, as for so many western musicians since, hearing gamelan inspired something like a religious conversion. I was given an old copy of this book shortly after I heard gamelan for the first time, & so I was able to follow McPhee on his great adventure to find where the music came from. When he arrived in Bali, he discovered that although the culture was vibrantly alive, much of music was in danger of being lost. He met, befriended, & studied with some greatly talented Balinese musicians, old masters & several younger composers & leaders, including Wayan Lotring & Made Lebah. They set about restoring a Semar Pegulingan gamelan. The task of bringing this music back to life is the "plot" of the "A House In Bali." McPhee quickly realized that his western musical training was of limited value, because the "values" of music - technically & culturally - in Bali were so different. Music had popular, ritual, & concert functions, as in the West. But the music was inseparable from the instruments, & each collection of instruments - each gamelan, was unique. Compositions were learned by rote, in phrases, with the gamelan functioning as a kind of all-ages social club for men. McPhee had to become, as best he could, a person of Bali, a villager, someone with a place & a role in the life of the community. He recounts his immersion in Balinese life, As strange as Bali was for McPhee, he was the "stranger," the outsider, & he remained one, oddly indifferent to what the Balinese thought of his lifestyle. Most inexplicably, he seems not to have become a gamelan musician. One wonders not only how he resisted this experience, but also why? McPhee later attempted to translate Balinese music into a western idiom using pianos & a symphony orchestra, with beautiful results, but losing what he had learned in the process, Sadly, when he returned home, he had left the most important stuff behind.

Colin McPhee takes you there with words that paint a perfect picture of Bali as he viewed and lived it. Not just a cold Anthropology, nor Ethnomusicology account, but a true life story poetically and personally described in refined and colorful detail.

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