

**HUMANISTIC JEWISH ROLE MODEL 2023-2024**

SIR JONATHAN (“JOHNNY”) PAUL CLEGG (1953-2019)



Secular Jewish humanist Johnny Clegg was a South African superstar singer-songwriter with millions of fans in South Africa and many more millions worldwide for his “crossover” (Western with African, mostly Zulu) music that included Zulu dance in his concerts, but also for his years-long courageous opposition to apartheid. He was undoubtedly the most beloved white man in South Africa, famous for bringing people together, both as fans of his music and physically at his concerts with the interracial bands Juluka (“sweat”) and later Savuka (“rise up”) he helped form. His anti-apartheid stance

was in both the lyrics of his songs and in his performing in multi-racial bands. Johnny was first arrested for illegally being in a Black township studying Zulu music and dance at age 15. He had many encounters and escapes from police over the years after that.

Many say of Johnny that he did not just write popular songs; he wrote anthems; anthems that helped tear down apartheid. His anthem “Asimbonanga” (“We have not seen him [Mandela]”), written when Mandela had been imprisoned for 23 of his 27 years, might have been the greatest of all of South Africa’s anti-apartheid anthems (Mandela surprises Johnny on stage: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGS7Spl7oby>). Indeed, Asimbonanga was played as the soundtrack on several recorded tributes to Nelson Mandela after his death.

Johnny began as an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, teaching at his alma mater, the University of the Witwatersrand (where lawmaker and fellow SHJ Humanistic Jewish Role Model 2020-21 Helen Suzman had also taught). He published several seminal papers on Zulu music and culture (<https://www.wits.ac.za/news/sources/alumni-news/2019/johnny-clegg-1953-2019.html>). But he soon transitioned to being a champion and ambassador for that music and culture he loved and admired so much for its wisdom, rather than just being a devout student of it.

Johnny’s secular Jewishness is amply demonstrated in writings about him and in his own statements ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny\\_Clegg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Clegg); [https://ideas.fandom.com/wiki/Johnny\\_Clegg](https://ideas.fandom.com/wiki/Johnny_Clegg); [https://www.jewage.org/wiki/en/Article:Johnny\\_Clegg - Biography](https://www.jewage.org/wiki/en/Article:Johnny_Clegg_-_Biography); <https://www.last.fm/music/Johnny+Clegg+&+Juluka/+wiki>).

As far as humanism, his entire life embodied it, including his deep respect for other cultures, which shows up so thoroughly in his music life, as well as his chosen academic career. His religion was humanity.

Another guiding aspect of his humanism was that Johnny knew marginality – British father, Jewish mother from then Rhodesia, being a young new immigrant to South Africa. His life in many ways was a quest for his identity, about which he was very open. That venture of seeking led him to a Black township near Johannesburg, to its Zulu street music and dance and Zulu culture, and then to anthropology and its study of all forms of human culture, and eventually to a quest to identify as a holistic human being, not rooted in one “tribal” cultural identity over another. (Therein is a lesson for today.)

Here are a few of many references on his humanism, all of them very worthwhile reading:

**Apartheid, anthropology and Johnny Clegg**

“Clegg’s personal and musical journey was a pursuit of a universal humanist culture, one that refused the narrow boundaries of racial and cultural essentialism. It was an attempt at using anthropology as performative practice, to not only decode and interpret but to communicate common hopes and struggles. ‘Anthropology tells us that before all culture is human culture,’ he says, ‘There exists a different expression of the same human need. We are all involved in one project.’”

<https://africasacountry.com/2019/07/apartheid-anthropology-and-johnny-clegg>

**Johnny Clegg: Rebel, intellectual, musician**

“Clegg inspired millions and offered a deeply humanistic social and political vision.”

<https://mg.co.za/article/2019-07-18-johnny-clegg-rebel-intellectual-musician/>

**Johnny Clegg The Final Journey**

“Shying away [from] any proclamation that his music [is] political, he favors it as humanistic. The politics found his music, not the other way around. There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. And herein lies that case as his songs served as a musical rallying cry while Apartheid collapsed. This is indisputable.”

<https://www.gratefulweb.com/articles/johnny-clegg-final-journey>

\*\*\*\*\*

Johnny Clegg. OBE; Chevalier des Arts et Lettres [France, where he was beloved more than in any other Western country]; Order of Ikhamanga [South Africa's highest honor]; many honorary doctorates.

And, many of his fellow Zulu (and other South African) brother and sister human beings, who embraced him as much as he did them, might well add this far more ancient and abiding honor in their Hamba Kahle to him: Iqhawe Lamaqhawe.

Not bad for a curious Jewish kid who fell in love with the culturally rich street music of South Africa's oppressed and went on to become a role model for how to be a human being in today's complex, fractious, and too-tribal world. RIP Legend.

**SPECIAL THANKS TO PROFESSOR RICHARD D. LOGAN, PH.D. FOR CREATING THIS DOCUMENT**