

Bring da noise

Youth culture and freedom

Adam Haupt

I was asked to reflect on the extent to which freedom has changed the airwaves with regard to South African youth culture/s and local music. I would, instead, like to suggest that much of the reverse is true. It is true that the democratic transition opened up new possibilities for artists. But I contend that youth culture – specifically hip-hop – has played a significant role in facilitating the democratic transition: by smoothing the way for young black subjects' access to the public sphere.

Freedom became a political reality in April 1994, but a great deal needed to be done to make this a reality in terms of everyday experiences, especially with regard to socio-economic issues. The work of cultural and community activists played a significant role in claiming space in the public sphere – in performance and media spaces – previously unavailable to young black people, and thus needing to be claimed with vigour.

Nancy Fraser argues that “the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is [not] necessarily a step away from [...] greater democracy”. She offers the term “subaltern counterpublics to signal that they [these media] are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”. By extension, politically oppositional work by early hip-hop crews like Black Noise and Prophets of da City (POC) made it possible for “counterdiscourses” to be developed and thereby enrich our fledgling democracy. As I will suggest later, attempts at constructing

“parallel discursive arenas” continue in the work of some of the younger hip-hop artists.

Prior to the kwaito explosion in the mid '90s, hip-hop attempted to lay claim to the public sphere via the Black Consciousness (BC) inspired challenges to apartheid in the music of hip-hop crews like POC and Black Noise. Much of their work was supported by workshops and awareness programmes, such as Black Noise's *Heal the Hood*, 1998, and POC's voter education programme or anti-drug tour in 1993. POC's explicit wariness of attempts at reconciliation on their 1993 album *Age of Truth* placed the crew at odds with censors, political parties, as well as their music distributor, placing its future on shaky ground. A great deal of POC's provocative BC-aligned work on albums such as *Age of Truth*, *Phunk Phlow* and *Ghetto Code* set the scene for the newer generations of hip-hop heads. A number of heads were engaged in creative projects, but the most prominent crews at the time were Black Noise and POC.

On the whole, it seemed as if the hip-hop scene in South Africa was facing a cul de sac, particularly in the face of the growing popularity of gangsta rap. Ten years later, the scene seems to have turned itself around in Jo'burg and Cape Town. In the past, Jo'burg was seen to be decidedly less “conscious” than Cape Town's hip-hop heads. This perception no longer holds, particularly when considering the work of Tumi and the Volume, Cashless Society, H2O and the Hymphatic Thabs. Cape Town has seen a significant growth in range of artists, including female crew Godessa, Brasse vannie Kaap, Moodphase 5ive, Fifth Floor, Parliament, and

individual emcees such as the late Devious and Caco.

I distinguish between “conscious” hip-hop, gangsta rap and R&B/hip-hop pop music. In “conscious” hip-hop circles, the term “hip-hop heads” – or just “heads” – is often used by hip-hop communities to refer to those who embrace hip-hop subculture. The obvious appeal of the alliteration and metonym aside, the term alludes to the idea that hip-hop practitioners engage with the medium with a significant level of consciousness and critical awareness. The “conscious” hip-hop notion of “knowledge of self” is purported to drive all of the different elements of hip-hop (rapping, b-boying, aerosol art, and deejaying) as individual physical self-expressions. This alludes to the belief that you need to engage in serious critical introspection before you can make a meaningful contribution to your political and social context as an artist, intellectual or activist.

Gangsta rap, R&B and pop music in general operate in a largely mainstream context. Artists such as Warren G, Snoop Doggy Dog and Dr.Dré are commonly associated with the gangsta rap genre, which has often been accused of cementing stereotypes of black male subjects as violent, misogynist gangsters.

The concept “bling-bling” has often been used by these artists, alluding to their lyrical fascination with signifiers of wealth, such as gold jewels, flashy cars, as well as sexually available women. However, some gangsta rappers – like the late Tupac Shakur, with his *Dear Mama* – have managed to produce ‘conscious’ lyrics.



The tidy binary between “conscious” and gangsta rap has thus been blurred on a number of occasions. Artists such as Jay Z, Puff Daddy/P Diddy and Missy Elliot have also managed to fuse R&B and rap for the mainstream pop market. Boy bands like InSync, and solo pop artists like Justin Timberlake have managed to tap into this.

Much like POC and Black Noise, the new generation of emcees employ hip-hop as a means through which they make sense of life in post-apartheid South Africa. These emcees therefore tap into notions of knowledge of self, and some of them cite crews like POC as a key inspiration for their own work. Dick Hebdige contends that subcultures “represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media”. Subculture interrupts the “process of ‘normalisation’” and contradicts “the myth of consensus” in its attempts to challenge hegemony. Hip-hop as a subculture is engaged in a struggle over the sign in its attempts to challenge mainstream representations of those on the margins. However, these attempts come at a price. Crews like POC have faced censorship and poor record sales with the release of albums like *Age of Truth*, specifically. These difficulties have been documented by the crew itself in songs such as *Cape Crusader*:

*My pockets are broken, cause the prophet is
outspoken
They say mindless topics only get the crowd open
They even said you’ve got to sound like this one or
that one
Silence is golden, even platinum
And drop the knowledge trip and politics
and holler shit to get the Rand and the Dollar quick
Life is kinda funny with the gospel it sends me
Money can test your morals if your tummy’s empty
Being desolate can tempt a kid for duckets
and say anything to benefit the pockets
I just hope I stay true for later and remain a Cape
crusader
(POC, 1997).*

Hebdige reminds us that subcultures speak through commodities and therefore work from within the operation of capitalist processes of retail, marketing and distribution. Hip-hop, much like punk subculture or reggae before it, thus walks a tightrope and it is “fairly difficult [...] to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation [...] and creativity/originality [...] even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures”. The very means, then, that “conscious” hip-hop artists use to issue its challenges to hegemony are the very means by which their work can be co-opted by the conservative mainstream. It is arguable that much of the mainstream hip-hop, or kwaito, for that matter, available from mainstream media, has crossed this line, particularly with regard to its gender discourse.

While work by a number of artists continues to engage with debates about racial identity and the legacy of apartheid (for example, Black Noise, Tumi, and Emile Jansen’s solo work), hip-hop artists such as Godessa, Tumi and the Volume and Moodphase 5ive engage with topics such as AIDS, gender violence and globalisation. Some of these artists’ work has been supported by former POC emcee and producer Shaheen Ariefdien via workshops such as HIV HOP, Youth Against AIDS (YAA) and ALKEMY (Alternative Kerriculum [sic] for Mentoring Youth). Ariefdien and the Broadcast Training Initiative’s Nazli Abrahams have been key in facilitating education programmes employing hip-hop as a tool to engage

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individuals who might not necessarily have access to higher education. The programme includes teaching aspects of creative writing (rap lyrics, prose), as well as critical theory, drawing on anthropological and postcolonial texts. Students in the programme might typically engage with theorists like Noam Chomsky, Frantz Fanon, Michael Parenti, Edward Said, Michel Foucault or Ferdinand de Saussure. Established artists like Godessa and the late Devious have also benefited from these workshops and have continued to collaborate with Ariefdien and Abrahams on a number of projects.

Godessa’s collaboration with Moodphase 5ive offers a positive example of the kind of work younger heads produce, and points to the kind of contribution hip-hop continues to make to the public sphere via its discursive practices. The crews worked together on *Got to Give*, which received a significant amount of airplay on commercial radio stations like Metro FM and Cape community radio station Bush Radio. The song offers four narratives about heterosexual women’s relationships with men. In the last stanza Godessa’s EJ von Lyrik and Moodphase 5ive’s D.Form enact a boy-meets-girl scenario. D.Form’s stereotypical player persona sees a girl at a mall and decides to pursue her as he declares her the “princess of my ghetto body collection”. The player persona is not unlike a number of township youngsters, who make distinctions between the different women with whom they have sex. Here, a distinction is made between “spares and besties”. Condoms are only needed when having sex with “spare” women, as opposed to “besties”, who are steady partners and who, presumably, do not have multiple sexual partners themselves. The male conquest motif is established in the song, and the stanza reaches a climax when D.Form declares: “We nice and tipsy now, feeling frisky now / Wanna take it to the next level / We can play angel and devils.”

EJ responds: “So where your rubber at?”

The smooth talker replies: “But baby, you see, let me take you on a ride to the stars bareback, you see.”

This exchange hints at the sorts of compromises women are expected to make in heterosexual encounters that are meant to be consensual, making them vulnerable to HIV infection. Von Lyrik’s assertive reply hints at the idea that such scenarios are anything but consensual – a return to the notion of noise:

*Listen, I don’t want to engage in this communication
Let’s sit down, have a drink and a good conversation
[...]
You see, whenever we together, I’m the one always tripping
Before you slip in
and our bodies create a rhythm, this is for certain
I can make you understand sticking to the plan
Won’t make you less of man
(Moodphase 5ive & Godessa, 2002).*

The song speaks to a set of experiences not often articulated in the public sphere – at least not in ways that move beyond misogynist representations by gangsta rappers or some kwaito musicians. It also speaks to female artists’ attempts to access the public sphere on their own terms and articulate a set of issues that often do not get addressed positively in the mainstream media.

What is at stake here is a question of access to the means of production and self-representation.

Johannesburg-based crew Tumi and the Volume’s album *At the Baseline* offers another positive example. Their popular song 76 keeps South Africa’s history of youth struggle against apartheid in the



popular consciousness, whilst *Yvonne* keeps gender on the agenda, engaging with gendered violence in the country. It is performed as a playful seduction, in which Tumi’s persona charms/harasses a beautiful woman into giving him her number. The female character, Yvonne, is raped in the narrative by two thugs.

From her narrative it becomes apparent how difficult it is for women to negotiate their way through public spaces like the streets of Johannesburg:

*A five minute walk, through this place
Takes an hour in the city
See brothers act rude and throw gestures at you
Some will even try to grab like you in a petting zoo
You gotta get fully dressed and not summon suggestions
That will get you pressed to brothers
Thinking you show interest
I may be bugging but it’s like slavery or something
These cats mastered the art of space invasion but fuck it
I will deal with it tell them straight
How they make me feel and shit
It gets to a point where I feel conflict is imminent
(Tumi and the Volume, 2003).*

The serious end to a seemingly playful narrative raises questions about Tumi’s persona in the song, as well as what constitutes acceptable behaviour with



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regard to gender practices. No easy consensus is immediately available here.

It is by placing marginal subjects' concerns on the agenda that youth culture is playing a significant role in making freedom a reality. Further evidence for this claim can be found in the fact that SABC1's hit edusoap *Yizo Yizo* has included kwaito and hip-hop artists – like Zola, H2O, Skwatta Kamp and Kabelo – on its soundtracks. The challenges to these attempts include the increasing commodification of youth culture as well as the pervasiveness of US cultural imperialism. These challenges have been acknowledged via programmes like ALKEMY, as well as with songs like POC's *Wack MC's* – which offers a scathing attack on gangsta rap – and Godessa's *Social Ills*, a critique of US imperialism in the economic and cultural society.

It is in this sense that these “conscious” hip-hop heads continue to make noise in their attempts to raise critical consciousness and produce “counter-discourses” which challenge seemingly seamless processes through which consent is manufactured by dominant classes.

References

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