AFRICAN MUSIC 2023
Volume 12 (1), 21–36

https://doi.org/10.21504/amj.v12i1.2529

Original Research Article

Kwaito as history: Complicating contemporary historiographies

DION MALCOLM EABY-LOMAS

Music Department, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Correspondence: ebydio001@myuct.ac.za

ABSTRACT: Considering it in relation to the earlier musical culture of kwaito, this article aims to begin a historicisation of the Black, township music of amapiano. "Kwaito as history," much like the musical cultures in question, is ambiguous in that it considers kwaito and the musics that preceded it as part of amapiano's history and as a tool to study the history of the latter musical form. I do this by positioning amapiano within a longer history of Black township music, focusing mbaqanga, bubblegum, and kwaito. In this article, I demonstrate how amapiano's emphasis on dance; the role of the township; and broader conceptions of a Black South Africa no longer divided along ethnic lines can be traced back to earlier forms such as marabi and mbaqanga. I show how the music's new modes of politics; the broad influence of Euro-American styles; and use of new technologies (specifically synthesised sounds) show a clear connection with bubblegum. Concerning kwaito and amapiano, I compare the issues of the date and place of origin; the role of international sonic preferences; the innovative approaches of young, Black township residents to music-making and dissemination. I have used existing historical accounts of Black, township dance music to demonstrate the multivocal and ambiguous nature of these histories.

KEYWORDS: amapiano, kwaito, history, township, youth, dance, music, post-apartheid

Amapiano is an electronically produced dance music that emerged in South Africa's Black townships in around 2012.[1] Townships, a legacy of the apartheid government, continue to be characterised by unemployment, stark racial division, lack of access to basic services and poverty. While the townships outside Pretoria and Johannesburg remain central to amapiano's development, the music has since grown to become the most consumed sound in the country, and it continues to grow in its appeal around the world. Literally meaning "the pianos," the music features digital synth keys, pads, and basses (including its distinctive bass instrument, the log drum)

1. Focalistic's *Ke Star* is a typical example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WcA7WpI-9c

alongside a bed of sampled percussion sounds. These percussion sounds usually begin a song and are followed by the gradual addition of melodic and harmonic elements until the song, often lasting more than seven minutes, reaches two or more peaks, and the process is reversed. Influenced by deep house music, as well as local house and kwaito music, amapiano is slower than gqom, playing at around 112 beats per minute. The music features a variety of vocal styles including singing, chanting, rapping, and improvised vocalisations.

Amapiano's history is full of contradictory origin stories, external influences, and unexpected encounters. This paper argues that this history can be traced back to earlier Black township music, most notably kwaito. Gavin Steingo, who has published extensively on the topic, reflected on the lack of a definitive history of kwaito and suggested that this may only happen "when no one is listening to kwaito anymore" (2008, 88). He suggests that "Perhaps the truth lies here: fourteen years after the birth of South African 'democracy', we write kwaito's history as its eulogy, kwaito the nostalgic, fictive historical marker of jubilation in a 'rainbow nation' that stubbornly refused to materialize" (Ibid.).

This article challenges the notion of history as "eulogy," instead aiming to capture the ambiguities and multivocal nature of amapiano's history in the present, just as more and more people around the world listen to it. To achieve this, I raise several important facets of amapiano which can be traced back to earlier Black, township dance musics. Doing so illustrates not only the historical connections between amapiano and earlier forms, but also how such histories should be approached. I would argue that a definitive history of any of these musics is impossible, given the plethora of influences from both local and international musical traditions and the sheer number of contributors to each of these. Thus, "kwaito as history" is also ambiguous in that I treat kwaito both as part of amapiano's history and as a means to study its history. Throughout, I use the existing literature on kwaito and earlier forms as a comparative tool to initiate a historicisation of amapiano, one which aims to capture the contradictory nature of such as a history rather than to describe it in full.

Mbaqanga as history

If amapiano is indeed a post-kwaito music, representing another youthful manifestation of a form with a longer history, how far back can one go? Where and when does this form begin? Amapiano is new, in as far as it needs to be new to fully capture the voice of a South African Black youth still not entirely free. It is simultaneously a rupture and a continuity. To examine this, I turn to kwaito's longer history.

Gibson Boloka, in one of the first articles on kwaito, traces the roots of bubblegum and kwaito to the 1970s mbaqanga or "jive" music of the Johannesburg townships, which is in turn rooted in marabi dance music (Boloka 2003).[2] Like

2. Marabi refers to a township style that combined American jazz influences and local

the even earlier form of marabi, mbaqanga was primarily performed in shebeens, originally illegal drinking houses which opened in response to the Liquor Act of 1927, which prohibited "Africans" and Indians from serving liquor and entering licensed premises. Thus, these forms functioned first and foremost as entertainment, alongside education, cultural expression, and identity construction through their lyrical content (Ibid., 98–99). Boloka insightfully asserts the important public role and expansion of the shebeens, "ethnically" separated radio, the popularity of radio, the migrant labour system, and a local and international common culture of the apartheid struggle as factors that contributed to the success of mbaqanga (Ibid.). This is significant in that it marks a shift from the "ethnically" divided music (which was usually monolingual and "tribal") sanctioned by the apartheid government towards more general Black popular music forms — a shift which would be solidified in bubblegum.

The local appropriation of bubblegum

Viljoen sees no contradiction when she writes

> As part of the continuing globalization of the South African music industry and the world-wide emergence of disco and house styles, mbaqanga gave birth to a local appropriation of Euro-American bubblegum in the 1980s (2008, 57).

This quote wonderfully captures the undecidable nature of the emergence of South African bubblegum. A South African form, with a South African history gives birth to an appropriation of Euro-American music. While Steingo fairly criticised Coplan for ignoring the cultural production of international bubblegum music in the creation of the local form (Steingo 2008, 78), I am acutely aware of the importance of considering the outside influences in my examination of South African bubblegum or "township pop."[3]

Bubblegum, as I use it here, refers specifically to the South African form of popular music, characterised by energetic beats intended for dancing. With cosmopolitan attitudes growing, Euro-American bubblegum pop became incredibly popular in township spaces. Commentators have linked the name bubblegum with the transient popularity and perceived shallowness that characterised the songs (Boloka 2003, 99; Coplan 2005), although this may be an over-simplification. Steingo suggests that this is more likely a reference to the popular bubblegum music from the USA and Europe which inspired the music (2008, 78).

Authors addressing bubblegum and kwaito (such as Boloka 2003, Coplan 2005, Steingo 2008, and Viljoen 2008) note several important characteristics of bubblegum music that relate to the history of kwaito and to which I draw attention. First, they

rhythms. It developed between the 1890s and 1920s (Collins 2002; South African History Online 2023).

3. The phrase is used by Louis Meintjes in 2003, as cited in Steingo (2008, 80). However, Steingo may have jumped too quickly to assuming the synonymity of these two terms, given that it appears that Meintjes' ethnography focused on a more contemporary form.

claim that the lyrics are mostly repetitive and less important than the dancing. This can be seen as an important departure from mbaqanga before it which, though mostly used for entertainment purposes, was often still explicitly political. In bubblegum, this apolitical nature is suggested to have allowed practitioners to avoid censorship and to disengage from politics. Coplan has suggested that the name "bubblegum" may have been used to mislead government officials (Coplan 2008, cited in Steingo 2008, 79). It also seems fair to assume that the mostly unpolitical (or perhaps more accurately, the non-oppositional or subversive) nature of the lyrics would have made bubblegum artists less susceptible to censorship, punishment, exile, and so forth. I discuss the notion of disengagement in the next section.

As is often the case when foreign musical forms are appropriated, the earliest insertions of South African characteristics into localised bubblegum involved using local languages and lyrics pertaining to the life of urban Black South Africans. Viljoen (2008, 58) mentions specifically the mixture of English, Zulu, Sesotho, and Iscamtho, the latter being a vital part of kwaito language (see, for example, Ndabeni 2018, 80–92). Boloka helpfully compares this and mbaqanga, which was mostly monolingual, noting the change in the broader cultural landscape between "ethnically" divided radio stations and the introduction of television that was aimed at Black audiences more generally (2003, 101–102).

The above authors also raise the matter of the importance of township spaces in relation to this musical trajectory. Much like mbaqanga, Viljoen connects the consumption of bubblegum to Black townships (2008, 58). This is a crucial feature of kwaito and amapiano, not only as their primary space of production and consumption, but also as a source of identity and authenticity.

The emphasis on dancing that characterises amapiano can be traced through these musical forms, all the way back to marabi. What sets these recent popular music forms apart from earlier ones is that they developed more purely out of a need for entertainment, usually for migrant labourers. Coplan quotes Johnny Clegg, who explains this well:

> "Good time" music is reconstitutive because it says, climb inside and I'll make you whole, get up off your chair, don't feel so bad, let's move together, a bit more strongly with each repeated cycle of the song … It is defiant. It expresses the determination that every one of us will be free one day. It cannot be explicitly political … it expresses in its tone, in the sound of the voice and the sound of the instruments, the soul of the black South African (Coplan 2005, 16).

Viljoen similarly calls attention to bubblegum's emphasis on dance, specifically how dance is prioritised over lyric-writing (2008, 57). The party space is simultaneously a temporary freedom from harsh socio-political circumstances and a "defiance" of such circumstances.

Finally, the music itself. Descriptions of bubblegum usually draw attention to the use of synthesised sounds (Viljoen 2008, 66). Meintjes takes note of how bubblegum (or "township pop," as she calls it) made use of "absolutely electronic,

contemporary-sounding timbres," which were programmed and sequenced, designed not to emulate acoustic instruments but to be wholly new sounds (2003, 154, cited in Steingo 2008, 80). She notes the use of signal-processing effects which are added to the voice, namely reverb, chorus and echo (Ibid.), all of which are vital components of amapiano whose local meaning and use can be traced, as indicated, back through kwaito to bubblegum, although significantly changed by new international influences such as deep house. Boloka points out another important musical feature important in kwaito that also features in amapiano: call and response (Boloka 2003, 102). Using Arthur's song "Mnike" (Mafokate 2000) as an example, he describes how call and response strengthens the interaction between singers and listeners. It is worth noting that amapiano tends to make use of the internationally popular form of the hook (a short, repeated phrase) rather than call-and-response parts (see for example, "Bopha" by Mellow and Sleazy and Felo Le Tee, or "Bakwa Lah" by Major League Djz and others).

Brenda Fassie and *Weekend Special*

I now return to the notion of "political disengagement," which both Stephens (2000) and Boloka (2003) point out, in a rather limited way, as being an important facet of kwaito. While it is certainly true that the lyrical content of many bubblegum songs, and subsequently kwaito and amapiano songs, do not express overtly oppositional politics against the apartheid and post-apartheid government, it is too simplistic an observation to call this a "disengagement" from political discourse. As Clegg mentioned earlier, the very act of having a good time as a Black South African under apartheid was defiant, in much the same way that having a good time as a working-class Black youth of the township is today. Several songs have been put forward as examples of political discourse "creeping" its way into kwaito songs, but I would argue that these are not unusually political. Instead, they are part of a form that does politics differently. While kwaito's re-interpretation has been discussed elsewhere (see Steingo 2007, 2016, Ndabeni 2018, 1–12, and Livermon 2020, among others), here I argue that kwaito's mode of political engagement is linked to earlier forms and finds early expression in the life and music of bubblegum legend, Brenda Fassie and her song, "Weekend Special."

Fassie is one of the most important names (arguably the most important) in South African bubblegum music. Coplan goes as far as to write that "bubblegum begins and ends with the recent tragically ended career of Brenda Fassie" (2005, 12). While Coplan's statement offers an exaggerated view that ignores her blurring of the boundaries between musical forms in her later life, Viljoen argues for the importance of Fassie's legacy to kwaito (2008). She argues that, while she was best known as a bubblegum artist, Brenda Fassie's music of the 1980s was "hugely influential on later kwaito musicians," and that her tracks from the early 1990s may even be considered to be kwaito (Ibid., 51). Viljoen considers bubblegum "part of the continuing globalization of the South African music industry and the world-

wide emergence of disco and house styles," connecting South African bubblegum with the Euro-American form of the same name (Ibid., 57). She cites The Soul Brothers as an early example, followed by Fassie, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, and Chicco Twala (Ibid.). Viljoen notes how Fassie blurred the boundaries of the local and global and of the stylistic differences between kwaito and bubblegum (Ibid., 69).

"Weekend Special" offers a good example of this new mode of political engagement. This song has been put forward as an example of one with lyrics bordering on the political (Coplan 2005, 12). "Weekend Special" responds to the issue of the infidelity of Black men seen in the practice of their having "weekends-only" girlfriends.[4] Specifically, Fassie protests, "I'm no weekend special," using feminine agency to call out men who use women in this way. Earlier commentators, such as Coplan, imply that this is somehow less political, saying "*Weekend Special* was political only in the sexual sense" (Ibid., 14). However, the apartheid system was designed in the defence of white patriarchy. The migrant labour system itself, one of the primary causes for there being "weekends-only" girlfriends, was imposed by the apartheid government. In this light, Fassie's statement is a defiant one on both a sexual and political level.

I would like to take note of how this obviously political statement has been received in South Africa. Many misremember and mishear these lyrics as, "I'm your weekend special", rather than "I'm no weekend special". While this does not entirely change the meaning of the lyrics (the former could be read as the man being called out for treating the woman as if she were a mere weekend special, rather than simply rejecting the idea as in the actual lyrics), the actual lyrics do contradict the common understanding of the song, specifically that being a "weekend special" expresses a positive experience. This inevitably leads to misunderstandings. For example, I remember seeing a white, middle-aged family friend romantically singing this to his wife. This points to the music's primary role as entertainment: the song expresses a socio-political theme, *and* its rhythms are infectious and its melody catchy. Many are perfectly happy ignoring the political sentiment of the song's lyrics in order to simply dance for enjoyment. For example, Marjorie Mubili said, "It's 2022 and [I] am still enjoying listening to this jam. Evoking fondest childhood memories" (Fassie 2022).

I do not wish to do away with the positive, social potential of popular music, though I do wish to add nuance to this notion of "disengagement." As Brenda Fassie herself said, "As a black woman I am very political. I eat politics, I sleep politics. Everything in my life is political because I can't run away from it" (Rogers 1990, 1, cited in Viljoen 2008, 62). Bubblegum, kwaito, and post-kwaito forms such as amapiano, as I argue below, do not represent a disengagement from the political but rather a new mode of engagement. Coplan notes how sound and movement can

4. This refers to expecting sexual or romantic favours from a woman on the weekend but ignoring her for the rest of the week.

be seen as the primary medium for the message of kwaito and that this redefines the notion of the political (Coplan 2005, 25). While I agree that kwaito uses sound and movement in its expression of the political, many kwaito artists, such as Zola 7, incorporate political themes in their lyrics, and therefore the entirety of the sensory experience can be political while simultaneously being committed to pleasure. I would argue that amapiano's approach to the political should not be seen as "disengagement" but as part of this historical mode of engagement through movement and sound, using every part of the sensory experience.

Perhaps completing this discussion is an impossibility. While it is clear from the above that Euro-American influences and local influences from mbaqanga converged at the moment of bubblegum's emergence, this idea risks ignoring other influences from both outside and inside the country, the latter including pantsula and kwela. Livermon points out that pantsula is more than a mere genre; rather, it is a way of life — in much the same way as kwaito (2020, 39–40). This is echoed by amapiano practitioners in the popular phrase, "amapiano is a lifestyle." Instead, I have demonstrated several features and influences of the musics that show a clear connection and trajectory towards kwaito and then amapiano.

Kwaito and the moment(s) of freedom

To perceive kwaito as a single, stable form would be to misunderstand it entirely. In much the same way, to limit its origin to a single moment would be to miss the multiplicity of forms from which it emerged.

Steingo posits a "(traumatic) break" between pre- and post-1994 kwaito (2005, 336). He argues that Nelson Mandela's inauguration as the first democratically elected president of South Africa dramatically changed kwaito music, marking the beginning of its maturation. He suggests that this change involved a dissociation from earlier musics such as bubblegum (Ibid.), legislation that promoted local music and boosted the popularity of kwaito (Ibid., 337), and a change of heart by radio stations and recording companies regarding kwaito (Ibid.). On the other hand, he later criticises the "fissures" or radical breaks that are implied by a historicisation that suggests that kwaito began after 1994 and the moment of freedom, using Niq Mhlongo's biography to show that Mandela's inauguration did not bring about any immediate changes to the lives of South Africans (Steingo 2008, 82–85; Mhlongo cited in Ibid.). The earlier article, then, suggests a traumatic break, while the later article rejects the idea that such sudden changes could have taken place. Is his argument in 2008 an updated, or perhaps corrected, version of the argument presented in 2005? Or, as I would argue, do these two arguments form yet another undecidability regarding kwaito's history? Steingo concludes the introduction to the 2005 argument with this statement: "If at times my analyses seem ambiguous or are difficult to comprehend immediately then I have succeeded. I do not wish to rob kwaito of its inherent ambiguity, nor do I wish to reduce it to a point" (2005, 334).

The emergence of kwaito is not a matter of a single moment, but a gradual process with several significant moments.

In a similar fashion, Viljoen writes, "I attempt a more nuanced historicization of kwaito in this article and seek to uncover continuities as well as ruptures in the post-apartheid period" — again acknowledging the importance of emphasising both the gradual process ("continuities") and significant moments ("ruptures"; 2008, 51). Livermon puts forward the notion of "remastering freedom" (after the music production concept of remastering as opposed to the quick, obvious changes of remixing), referring to subtle changes in the meaning of freedom for Black South Africans in the post-apartheid period, further reflecting the dual existence of significant moments and continuity (Livermon 2020).

If kwaito's emergence is a gradual process with several significant moments, what is the first one? Early academic accounts suggest that Mandela's release from prison, the excitement regarding the end of apartheid and, finally, the democratic elections of 1994 were responsible for the birth of kwaito. This implies that the primary function of the form was celebratory. In *Historicizing Kwaito*, Steingo critiques authors, such as Angela Impey and Bhekizizwe Peterson, who draw a parallel between the end of apartheid and the beginning of kwaito, thus implying that the musical form emerged as a celebration of apartheid's demise and intended to disengage from the oppositional politics of the apartheid era (Steingo 2005, 76–77). Instead, Steingo astutely observes the origins of kwaito in the 1980s, a period characterised by protests against, and the violent response of, the apartheid government. I agree with Coplan when he argues that kwaito was never a "genre-apart," that "its most skilled and creative exponents, such as Arthur, Abashante, Trompies, M'du or TKZee were swimming in the broader stream of South African pop traditions from the very first plunge" (2005, 11). Steingo shows the strong connections between kwaito and earlier, influential forms. Relevant here is that members of kwaito group, Trompies, namely Spikiri and Jakurumba, started off as dancers in a bubblegum group led by Chico Twala and that Eugene "Donald Duck" Mthethwa (also a member of Trompies) had played keyboards for South African reggae artist, Lucky Dube (Peterson 2003, 202; Steingo 2005, 336). It is from this broader stream of South African pop traditions that kwaito emerged.

The official "end" of apartheid in 1994 (marked by the first democratic elections) was certainly a significant moment, although it is more accurately a series of significant moments — such as the release of Mandela, the easing of the cultural boycott, the election, and the establishing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many of these significant moments were significant for kwaito, too. Steingo notes the changes in legislation that affected local music at this time, and particularly how radio opened up for kwaito musicians (2005, 337).

Another significant moment was the release of Arthur's 6-track EP, *Kaffir*, in 1995. This is seen as the first kwaito "hit" (Steingo 2005, 338). Post-apartheid South Africa was treated as a time of hope for a newer, brighter future for Black

South Africans. However, the ANC instead prioritised the growth of a small, Black elite. Livermon notes how their neoliberal policies left entire classes of Black South Africans without the agency to make any political change (2020, 8). Post-apartheid kwaito was then quickly mobilised by the Black youth to re-claim freedom for themselves. In the conclusion of *Kwaito Bodies*, Livermon adds that kwaito asked whether the establishment in the post-apartheid moment would allow for all forms of freedom for everyone, and if not, whether it could truly be considered freedom (Ibid., 233). Using Audre Lorde (1984, 136), he argues that the post-apartheid South African government turned inward to police its own community, rather than focusing attention on the oppressor, thus "reproducing the structures of white supremacy" (Ibid., 233). Kwaito, then, experimented with the limitations of freedom and thus exposed this government's self-seeking and hypocritical mode of freedom.

Livermon points to three examples of Afrodiasporic influences on kwaito. The first pertains to pelvic and hip-centred dance movements that were likely inspired by Congolese dances such as kwassa-kwassa and circulated by migrant labourers and cassette tapes (2020: 48). Second, he notes the ragga-muffin chanting style used by artists such as Junior Sokhela, which is reminiscent of that used in Jamaican dancehall music (Ibid.) Finally, he points to the use of slowed-down house tracks, arguing that they are evidence of "post-Fordist global circulations of Black youth musics and cultures that are not confined to hip-hop" (Ibid., 49). He argues that this was a result of the socio-political similarities between the emergence of Midwestern United States house music and kwaito (Ibid.). Livermon states that kwaito spawned from "cover versions," with an increasingly local flavour, of house tracks as a result of the local success of international house music (Ibid., 50).

In the late 1980s, house music was referred to as "international music" (Steingo 2016, 36). Steingo notes how international house tracks came to be known as "kwaito," possibly due to a link with specific taverns such as KwaKwaito (Kwaito's Place), or because of its use as a slang word for a cool guy (Ibid., 42). A common origin story is that someone DJing international house music accidentally put the record on at the wrong speed, which was well received by the crowd (Ibid., 35). This was the origin story that Thulani Headman told me (personal communication, 9 September 2021). Steingo mentions how M'du takes credit for the creation of kwaito, how Oscar "Warona" Mdlongwa started giving a local feeling to international house tracks, and how Arthur claims to be the king of kwaito, each thus making claims to the music (2005, 335). The form also went by other names, such as *guz*, *s'ghubhu*, and *d'gong*, which may represent separate forms, or, as Impey suggests, are all forms under the umbrella of "kwaito" (2001, 46).

As can be seen throughout the history of kwaito, notable agents provide several contradictory accounts. I have merely scratched the surface of the variety of origin stories and those who claim to have invented the form. I do not imply criticism, nor do I deny the possibility of each of these stories being true. Instead, I would argue that kwaito emerged as the result of many different forces and many individual

contributions. Each of these travelled in a way they had never been able to travel before, and these paths then converged and continue to converge in new ways today.

Amapiano: The how and the when

Uncovering the history of amapiano is a difficult task. Sources and accounts contest the location, date, and key agents of its emergence. Co-founder of record label, Born in Soweto, Siphiwe Ngwenya, has said, "If you put one hundred guys in a room and you asked them where [amapiano] started, you'll get one hundred answers and some very heated debates" (Spotify 2019). The music has changed dramatically since its early days, around 2012, with many of its sonic characteristics being new additions. However, considering the paper thus far, these issues are not new. Instead, they can be read as part of a longer history. Kwaito is undoubtedly an important part of amapiano's history; but what can the above teach us about how to approach the ambiguous, non-linear, and non-singular history of amapiano?

Seroto describes earlier amapiano compositions as "experimental and represent[ing] a spirit of freedom, devoid of any specific style but drawing influence from many. And the absence of gatekeepers would seed organic growth across cultural lines" (2020). It was during this early period of experimentation that the characteristic components of its contemporary sound were added, and it would thus be difficult, if not impossible, to say where an older style ended and amapiano began. The *Bless The Souls* EP by MFR Souls is a good example of an earlier version of the sound. Since the log drum and shaker were not yet characteristic of the sound, the EP sounds closer to its deep house influences. Kabza emphasises the role of experimenting township DJs, saying, "These boys like experimenting, and they always check out new plugins. So when Mdu[5] figured it out, he ran with it, and when I got it, I jumped into [sic] the bandwagon, and I ran with it" (quoted in De Vries 2021).This model reflects that of gqom, where new sound characteristics were added by individual producers and then mimicked by others, effectively adding them to the sound itself (Eaby-Lomas, 2021).

In addition, there are polarising arguments about the township of origin. Many sources insist that the musical form emerged from Johannesburg townships, namely, Alexandra, Soweto, East Rand, Tembisa, Vosloorus, and Katlehong (Mitchual 2020), while others emphasise Mamelodi, Atteridgeville, Hammanskraal, and Soshanguve, townships in Pretoria (Seroto 2020). David Ngoma, producer and Kabza De Small's manager, notes that each township had a producer whom they supported (Papercutt TV 2019). This would likely have led to an exaggeration of the role of these producers by the communities that supported them. However, a de-emphasising of the origins of the form is supported by its fans and practitioners. Da Kruk, for example, says that amapiano's origins do not matter in the face of its exponential growth, arguing that the future is more important (Mohlomi 2019b). This is confirmed by Wandile

5. That is, amapiano artist MDU AKA TRP.

Thema, narrator of amapiano documentary, *SHAYA!*, who closes the documentary saying, "amapiano is the future, it is here to stay" (Papercutt TV 2019). Ngoma argues that its spatial origins are unimportant and that it belongs to every kasi (township) (Ibid.). Seroto, however, criticises the popular narrative that the precise place and time of birth are unknown and emphasises the agency of early adopters of the music, such as DJ and producer duo MFR Souls (2020).

Despite these various complications surrounding its date of origin, it is generally accepted that the sound first took shape in 2012 (Mazaza 2020; Mohlomi 2021; Wikipedia). Much like kwaito's origin story — that a DJ accidently played a house track at the wrong rpm on a record player, thereby forming the basis of the sound — amapiano's emergence is connected to DJ performance. MC and artist Mark Khoza recounts the use of piano (electric keyboards) at DJ gigs as the first important moment in amapiano history (Papercutt TV 2019). "There is this other guy who started this thing, when someone [a DJ] was playing he'd take the piano as if he is in church and started playing" (Khoza in Ibid.). Da Kruk also links the emergence of amapiano to a "DJ culture" (Spotify 2019). The practice then moved into the studio. Khoza credits this innovation to Kabza De Small, who played this early form known as "inumba" or "number," along with DJs such as JazziDisciples, MFR Souls, and Gaba Cannal (Papercutt TV 2019; Mohlomi 2021; Seroto 2020). MFR Souls are credited with having coined "amapiano" in response to the increasing prominence of keyboards (Seroto 2020).

Similar to the "global circulations of Black youth musics" described by Livermon which led to kwaito, amapiano resulted from contacts with "international musics." In this case, deep house music has, and continues to be, an important influence. Others include various hip-hops, but mostly American hip-hop, as well as Afrodiasporic forms such as Afrobeats. Jake Colvin quotes artist JayMea who describes Soweto as a "whole musical environment," recalling the various ways that he was exposed to the influences of deep house, kwaito, gqom, rap, and even electronic dance music (Colvin 2024a). He mentions the influence the latter has had on artists who produce a more progressive style of amapiano, such as Vigro Deep (Ibid.). Reflecting a longer history of township music, amapiano has appropriated many of these forms to create a thoroughly local musical form, in much the same way as mbaqanga and bubblegum, as mentioned by Viljoen. A reviewer of my thesis commented on the tension inherent in these forms between sounding "African" enough to appeal internationally and "cosmopolitan" enough to appeal to local audiences. In much the same way, marabi was an "Africanised" form of jazz. Steingo notes that house music in South Africa was often referred to as "international" in the late 1980s, and the experience of such was in defiance of the censorship of foreign music in South Africa (2016, 34–36). He discusses how it was used as a label for international music and local music with an international appeal (Ibid., 40).

New technologies played a major role in the emergence of amapiano, in much the same way that they did with kwaito (Impey 2001; Stephens 2000, 259; Steingo

2016). Mohlomi describes amapiano as the meeting of various influences "with the creative, tech-savvy and DIY spirit of the country's youngest generations" (2021). These innovators made use of "cracked" (illegally downloaded) digital audio workstations, like FL Studio, which they taught themselves to use (Barnes 2020). Kabza de Small remembers struggling to comprehend this software and being denied help from those who did know because he would grow to be their competition for gigs (Papercutt TV 2019). He recalls making mixtapes on two DVD players, rather than using a professional DJing setup (Ibid.). Barnes recalls the role that economic limitations had on the emergence of kwaito (Barnes 2020), which is similar to the case of gqom (Eaby-Lomas 2021). These restraints have led to a "self-sustaining underground" infrastructure that relies on its own modes of dissemination (Barnes 2020). Colvin similarly addresses how limited access to the required resources has shaped the sound and nature of the musical form (2024b). As Colvin points out, reliance on the sounds of stock FL Studio plugins and "low tech" virtual studio technologies for their low CPU usage, for example, makes it possible to produce music on older laptops (Ibid.).

The internet has played a vital role in the distribution of the musical form, both between and beyond township spaces (Machaieie 2019; Seroto 2020; Spotify 2019). First, there is the Meta-owned, freeware messenger app, WhatsApp, specifically the use of the application's group function (Maneta, n.d.). Countless groups have been created for the purpose of sharing the latest amapiano tracks quickly and inexpensively. Groups include "Amapiano World," "Amapiano music," and "Amapiano fan base" (Ibid.). Kwiish SA states, "when you send music through WhatsApp, there is no stopping it. So the name Kwiish SA was already on kids' phones and I would hear my music being played in local taxis, not knowing exactly how it got there" (Mohlomi 2019b). Hundreds of new songs are shared through messaging apps and free file-sharing sites every day, with some enjoying short-lived fame and others becoming anthems of the form (Mohlomi 2019a). These practices have had a unique effect on the democratisation of the dissemination of amapiano and related musical styles. Da Kruk notes that a popular song can come from anyone, giving anyone fair opportunity (Mohlomi 2019b).

As with kwaito and gqom, amapiano was dismissed by radio stations as inferior, with many of them refusing to engage with the new sounds (Seroto 2020). One radio station host, DJ Da Kruk, saw the music's potential and dedicated an hour of his YFM radio show to playing the latest tracks (Ibid.). YFM also had an enormous impact on post-apartheid kwaito (Steingo 2016, 71). Many amapiano tracks were unmixed and unmastered and arguably unsuitable for radio; however, Da Kruk was captured by their basslines and keyboards and played them regardless (Papercutt TV 2019). Record labels were similarly hesitant to take on these new sounds, and many of them would sign artists only after they had received international attention (Barnes 2020). Da Kruk suggests that the apprehensiveness of radio stations about playing the music was also linked to a racial inequality. He argues that dance scenes

such as amapiano serve as the "voice of the majority with the minority of resources," and questions what freedom can mean for Black South Africans if corporate South Africa remains in white hands, looking after white interests (Ibid.). Da Kruk states that through corporate buy-ins and sponsorships, white-owned media (record labels, radio stations, and festivals) continue to prioritise white musicians (Ibid.).

Much like kwaito, and many of the musical forms discussed here, amapiano has never been a "genre-apart" (Coplan 2005, 11), that is, a single, stable form with a specific moment of origin. Instead, Coplan insightfully asserts that it exists within a "broader stream of South African popular music" (Ibid., 11). Several agents, such as DJ Maphorisa and Busiswa, have spanned many of these traditions. Themba Sonnyboy Sekowe, better known as DJ Maphorisa, began his career at kwaito record label, Kalawa Jazmee Records, and has produced house, Afropop, and gqom. Busiswa first worked with Oskido, a kwaito star, and has been involved in kwaito, gqom, and amapiano projects.

In an episode of Oskido's *Joy Ride*, amapiano producer and DJ Kabza De Small, explains the tendency among township DJs to slow down tracks for consumption in the townships; most likely he is referring to international house tracks (De Vries 2021). He mentions, specifically, finding songs at 125 bpm and playing them at 115 bpm. Kabza notes how this resulted in producers emulating this feeling in their own productions. He credits Mdu for introducing the characteristic bass instrument, the log drum, to these remixes, holding that "Amapiano music has always been there, but Mdu is the one who came up with the log drum sound" (Oskido 2021).

Final thoughts

Azile, an amapiano producer and fan in Langa, excitedly showed me the interview with Kabza De Small on *Joy Ride* when we were discussing the log drum (Interview, 17 March 2022). Kabza's revelation that Mdu was the one to introduce the log drum is certainly important. The first half of Kabza's statement, that "amapiano music has always been there," is equally important. Kabza views amapiano as part of a longer trajectory, or continuity, made up of significant moments. Seroto similarly calls the emergence of amapiano "coincidental" (Seroto 2020). This is much the same as kwaito artists, DJs, fans, and scholars seeing kwaito as a significant moment, or rupture, within a longer history.

In this article, I have demonstrated how amapiano's emphasis on dance, the role of the township, and broader conceptions of a Black South Africa no longer divided along "ethnic" lines can be traced back to earlier forms such as marabi and mbaqanga. I have shown how the music's new modes of politics, the wide influence from Euro-American styles, and use of new technologies (specifically, synthesised sounds) show a clear connection with bubblegum. I have compared the issues regarding the date and place of origin, the role of international sonic preferences, and the innovative approaches of young, Black township residents to music-making and the dissemination of kwaito and amapiano. I have used these existing historical

accounts of Black, township dance music to demonstrate the multivocal and ambiguous nature of these histories.

Writing a history of a contemporary form, where practitioners have stakes in being recognised for their innovations and contributions can lead to exaggeration; however, I would argue that several other factors contribute to this ambiguity. Colvin (2024b) discusses how collaboration can be necessary to overcome the material limitations experienced by amapiano practitioners. These are the same kinds of material limitations that have affected township musicians in the past. The sound of the music itself emerges from the gradual contributions of many producers and artists, in much the same way that "international music" was localised in kwaito (Steingo 2016, 36). Unlike the fresh and innovative musical style that is amapiano, the challenges of historicising it in the present are not new. Rather, they represent a longer history of Black township dance musics, which are similarly multivocal, ambiguous, and non-linear.

Acknowledgements
This work is based on the research supported wholly by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (grant reference number MND200625536796) for my master's thesis ("Kwaito's Legacy of Aestheticizing Freedom: Amapiano in Langa Township and the World"). I am thoroughly grateful for this support. I would also like to thank my supervisor, A/Prof. Sylvia Bruinders, whose help and expertise has been invaluable. Thank you to Bridges for Music Academy for their aid regarding my fieldwork, especially head of operations and founding member, Thulani Headman (DJ Fosta). A big thank you to the interlocutors and friends that I had the pleasure of working with there, especially Azile Manxiwa (DJ Blackish) and Yamnkela Kope (Antii). Finally, a special thank you for the support of my parents, family, and my wife Danielle, who has had to listen to the ideas discussed above more often than anyone else and will still make time to hear them again.

Author profile
Dion Malcolm Eaby-Lomas is an Oppenheimer Memorial Trust student currently enrolled in the PhD programme at the University of Cape Town. During his time at UCT he was awarded the Humanities Faculty Scholarship, two class medals and the Gunther Pulvermacher Essay Prize. He was awarded a Masters of Music (with distinction) from UCT in 2023, with a thesis titled "Kwaito's Legacy of Aestheticising Freedom: Amapiano in Langa Township and the World." His research interests lie in the way that South African music travels and empowers its performers on a global stage.
ORCiD — https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0753-9274

References

Barnes, Marcus. 2020. "'It Speaks to an Ancient History': Why South Africa has the World's Most Exciting Dance Music." *The Guardian*, December 21. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/21/south-africa-dance-music-afrohouse-gqom-amapiano.

Boloka, Gibson. 2003. "Cultural Studies and the Transformation of the Music Industry: Some Reflections on Kwaito." In *Shifting Selves: Post-Apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity*, edited by H. Wasserman and S. Jacobs, 97–107. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

Collins, John. 2002. "African Popular Music: A Historical Review of Sub-Saharan Africa." *University of Alberta*, March. https://sites.ualberta.ca/~michaelf/African%20Music_Site/AfricanPopularMusicCollins.htm.

Colvin, Jake. 2024a. "Amapiano's Second Wave: How Kwaito Opened the Door for Amapiano's Evolutions." *Mixmag*, May 28. https://mixmag.net/feature/amapiano-second-wave-south-africa-apartheid-kwaito-evolution-series.

Colvin, Jake. 2024b. "Amapiano's Second Wave: How Innovations Emerge from Black South African Culture." *Mixmag*, June 18. https://mixmag.net/feature/amapiano-second-wave-black-south-africa-culture-innovation-townships.

Coplan, David B. 2005. "God Rock Africa: Thoughts on Politics in Popular Black Performance in South Africa." *African Studies* 64 (1): 9–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180500139015.

De Vries, Gilmore. 2021. "Kabza De Small Explains Who and How Amapiano Music Started." *Savanna News*, October 29. https://savannanews.com/watch-kabza-de-small-explains-how-amapiano-music-started/.

Eaby-Lomas, Dion Malcolm. 2021. "Historicizing Gqom as a Post-Kwaito Phenomenon." *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* 18: 101–116. https://doi.org/10.2989/18121004.2021.2020964.

Fassie, Brenda. [1983] 2022. *Weekend Special*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjQD--fgCFM.

Focalistic. 2020. *Ke Star (feat. Vigro Deep)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WcA7WpI-9c.

Impey, Angela. 2001. "Resurrecting the Flesh? Reflections on Women in Kwaito." *Agenda* 49: 44–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/4066491.

Livermon, Xavier. 2020. *Kwaito Bodies: Remastering Space and Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131bzz.

Machaieie, Mario. 2019. "2019 The Year of The Yanos, How Amapiano Blow up." *Zkhiphani*, October 22. https://www.zkhiphani.co.za/2019-the-year-of-the-yanos-how-amapiano-blow-up/.

Mafokate, Arthur. 2000. *Mnike*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLTwkS3xYks.

Major League Djz, Mathandos, Nvcho. 2021. *Bakwa Lah*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq6zkFOHEiw.

Maneta, Rofhiwa. n.d. "From South Africa: Amapiano Goes Global." https://www.ballantines.com/en-za/blog/from-south-africa-to-the-world-amapiano-goes-global/.

Mazaza, Shiba M. 2020. "The Beautiful Chaos of Amapiano, South Africa's Emerging House Movement." *Mixmag*, October 20. https://mixmag.net/feature/amapiano-south-africa-house-music-movement-gauteng.

Mellow and Sleazy, Felo Le Tee. Bopha. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8ooeSin9ZM.

Meintjes, Louise. 2004. "Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the Mountain: The Production of Masculinity in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13 (2): 173–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/17411910420002861 85.

Mfr Souls. 2015. *Bless the Souls EP*. https://open.spotify.com/album/6ojJK4a1bxvsqVm42wQCy1?si=S7F2vj2ASF6Ut1Z2Ixc2MA.

Mitchual, Godwin. 2020. "Amapiano: The Beautiful History of the South African Music Genre." *Unorthodox Reviews*, June 29. https://www.unorthodoxreviews.com/amapiano-history-south-africa-music/.

Mohlomi, Setumo-Thebe. 2019a. "The 10 Best Amapiano Songs of 2019." *Okayafrica*, December 17. https://www.okayafrica.com/amapiano-best-songs-2019/.

Mohlomi, Setumo-Thebe. 2019b. "Amapiano: A Township Sound with Staying Power." https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2019-07-07-amapiano-a-townshipsound-with-staying-power/.

Mohlomi, Setumo-Thebe. 2021. "8 Things To Know About South Africa's Amapiano Genre: A Local's Guide to the Scene." *Billboard*, July 27. https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/9606724/8-things-to-know-about-south-africas-amapiano-genre-a-locals-guide-to-the-scene/.

Oskido. 2021. *Joy Ride With Oskido (EP 04) feat. Kabza De Small,Young Stunna,Niniola & Mgiftana.* YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_Y69GPxxDk.

Ndabeni, Esinako. 2018. "On Kombuistaals and Tsotsitaals." In *Born to Kwaito: Reflections on the Kwaito Generation*, edited by S. Mthembu and E. Ndabeni. BlackBird Books.

Papercutt TV. 2019. *SHAYA! Amapiano Documentary (FULL)*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B9frOKUwz0.

Peterson, Bhekizizwe. 2003. "Kwaito, 'Dawgs' and the Antimonies of Hustling." *African Identities* 1 (2): 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1080/1472584032000175650.

Seroto, Butchie. 2020. "Amapiano: What Is It All About?" *Music in Africa*, September 30. https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/amapiano-what-it-all-about.

South African History Online. 2023. "The Development of Music in South Africa Timeline 1600–2004." https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/development-music-south-africa-timeline-1600-2004.

Spotify. 2019. "Charting the Meteoric Rise of South Africa's AmaPiano." https://newsroom.spotify.com/2019-10-02/charting-the-meteoric-rise-of-south-africas-amapiano/.

Steingo, Gavin. 2005. "South African Music after Apartheid: Kwaito, the 'Party Politic,' and the Appropriation of Gold as a Sign of Success." *Popular Music and Society* 28 (3): 333–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760500105172.

Steingo, Gavin. 2007. "The Politicization of 'Kwaito': From the 'Party Politic' to Party Politics." *Black Music Research Journal* 27 (1): 23–44.

Steingo, Gavin. 2008. "Historicizing Kwaito." *African Music* 8 (2): 76–91.

Steingo, Gavin. 2016. *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stephens, Simon. 2000. "Kwaito." In *Senses of Culture: South African Cultural Studies*, edited by S. Nuttall and C.-A. Michael, 256–273. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Viljoen, Martina. 2008. "On the Margins of Kwaito." *World of Music* 50 (2): 51–73.

Wikipedia. 2022. "Amapiano." https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Amapiano&oldid=1124922583.