Local is *lekker*¹?
The perceptions of South African music among Durban adolescents

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**Abstract**

Popular music in South Africa was a way to uphold the racial divisions of the apartheid regime. Genres of music were pitched at certain segments of the population and this, coupled with the fact that during apartheid local music was often discredited for political reasons, led to the notion that local South African products were inferior to those from the West. This paper considers the state of South African popular music and its popularity among teenagers in Durban in 2004. The research reports on data collected from Grade 11 learners, and looks at their responses to, support of, access to and perceptions of local music. The results show that respondents support very little in the way of local music, with regard to listening to local music, purchasing local music and supporting local concerts.

**Keywords:** South Africa; youth; local music; perceptions.

This paper considers the listening habits of Durban adolescents and their perceptions of local popular music. The study was borne out of my experience growing up in apartheid and post apartheid South Africa, where I became aware of the negative perceptions many individuals held towards local cultural products. This study aimed to engage with those who consume popular music and discover if the youth of Durban are listening to and supporting local products.
Overview of the Music Scene in 2004

Before discussing the findings, it is important to contextualise the South African music scene in 2004, when this study was undertaken.

In 2001, a few years prior to this research, the South African music industry was the twenty-fifth largest in the world (GCIS 2002, p. 108). However, the industry was beset by many problems.

One of the main issues facing the local music scene was the alleged lack of marketing of South African cultural products (Anderson 1981; Chilvers and Jasiukowicz 1994). According to Chilvers and Jasiukowicz (ibid., p. iv), “music in South Africa is lazy. Production and promotional ideas are lazy and, through the years, hardly any effort was made to promote local artists whereas overseas artists received priority”.

The issue of cultural inferiority was another factor influencing the support of South African music. During the apartheid era local popular music was often discredited for political reasons and due to this an aura of negativity, which still exists today, hung over it (Kerr 2000).

The legacy of apartheid influenced the landscape of local popular music in other ways and during this time certain genres of music were pitched at certain segments of the population, and music came to be viewed as “white” music, “black” music, and so on. These distinctions still occur, compounded by radio stations that do little to introduce their audiences to music of other genres.

Due to the perceived limited support for South African popular music, the local music industry did little to promote or support local musicians. There was a lack of financial backing by the major recording companies and “limited finances available for investment in the development and promotion of South African artists” (Department of Arts and Culture 1998, p. 10). Thus, bands and musicians were forced to fund their own recording endeavours, which often resulted in substandard recordings, which were poorly distributed.

Finally, radio stations, TV stations and retail outlets, prime disseminators of local popular music, did little to promote local music (Du Plessis 2004; Kerr 2000).

Data Collection Methods

The data was collected at five schools in Durban. The schools are all co-educational schools and represent a wide cross section of the schools available in Durban in terms of cost and the race groups that the school attracts (see Table 1).

Grade 11 pupils (approximately sixteen - seventeen years old) at each school responded to a self-administered questionnaire which utilised a variety of questioning methods, including open and closed questions and closed questions utilising a Likert scale with the responses “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. A group of willing participants were carefully selected based on their responses to the questionnaire to participate in the focus group discussions at each school.
Table 1: Profile of schools surveyed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>NUMBER OF LEARNERS</th>
<th>SCHOOL FEES PER ANNUM</th>
<th>RACIAL MIX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>844</td>
<td>R600</td>
<td>Black - 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian - 39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coloured - 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>R1080</td>
<td>Indian - 90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black - 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coloured - 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>R8100</td>
<td>White - 63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black - 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian - 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>1094 (Grade 0 – 12)</td>
<td>R13 960 – R27 840</td>
<td>White - 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>R5300</td>
<td>White - 98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FINDINGS**

The findings of this study have been separated into three broad categories and take into account the responses to both the questionnaire and the focus group interviews. The first category looks at the respondents’ perceptions of local popular music and their support of local music; the second considers the position of South African music in comparison to international music; and the final category discusses the breakdown of the South African public into listening “segments” according to race.

**PERCEPTIONS OF AND SUPPORT FOR LOCAL POPULAR MUSIC**

To gauge the perceptions the respondents have towards South African music, they were asked to respond to the statement: “I enjoy listening to South African popular music”.


Table 2: “I enjoy listening to South African popular music”.

From the graph above it is clear that the majority of the 480 learners who responded to the questionnaire (53.5%) agree or strongly agree with this statement, while 36.6% are neutral, and only 9.9% disagree or strongly disagree. It is therefore logical to surmise that their enjoyment of local music would result in support for it. However, it was found that the respondents did not offer any tangible support for local music.

Table 3: Respondents’ listening choices.

In terms of listening patterns, the respondents were exposed to an average of three and a half hours of music per day (210 minutes), listened to an average of two hours of chosen music (120 minutes) and an average of twelve minutes of local music per day. Furthermore, 19.4% of the respondents listened to no local music at all.
At the time of this study accessing music digitally was just starting to emerge in South Africa and CDs were still the primary means of listening to music. Similarly, despite professing an enjoyment for South African popular music, local CDs made up a very small part of their CD collections. The respondents owned an average of 40.4 CDs and of this, an average of 2.9 were local CDs. Furthermore, 44.2% of respondents owned no local CDs at all.

The respondents claimed they enjoyed South African music, but this did not result in the expected support for it, financially or otherwise. The respondents were questioned about this further in the focus group interviews and feelings of cultural inferiority regarding South African products were evident in some of their responses.

When questioned about local popular music, the first respondent from School B answered that it was “crap” (James, School B, 2004) almost as if it was a reflex action. He then followed that statement with “no, no, not all of it is crap” (James, School B, 2004) and then proceeded, after more consideration, to name a few local bands that he enjoyed. Later still in the interview he conceded: “There are a lot of good artists […] I listen to South African music” (James, School B, 2004).

This response was a recurring one when discussing South African music. The initial response was to dismiss it in the same way that the respondent from School B did: “It’s crap”. However, later when the respondents thought about it, they were far less derogatory and in some cases went on to claim they did enjoy South African popular music.

The negativity regarding local music is interesting in light of the fact that respondents were asked in the questionnaire how they would recognise a band or a song as South African. The responses here fell into two broad categories: 32.4% would know by the “sound” or “feeling” of the song and would recognise it as South African, while 67.6% would only know a song was local if they were told. Thus, while many of the respondents displayed negative feelings towards local popular music, the majority of them would not know that a band or song was South African unless they were told. Since for most respondents there is nothing in the sound of the mu-
sic that makes it particularly “South African”, their responses are informed by what they have heard from others and thus could be due to feeling of cultural inferiority.

**LOCAL VS. INTERNATIONAL MUSIC**

It is not possible to discuss local music, without some discussion of “the other”: in this case, international music. The effects of globalisation and cultural imperialism on South African music cannot be ignored (Anderson 1981; Chilvers and Jasiukowicz 1994; Kerr 2000): as Jones and Jones (1999, p. 225) point out, “more and more people across the globe are receiving the same message from the same centres of communication power”.

During the interviews it became clear that the respondents viewed South African music with a strange duality. On the one hand, they used international music as a yardstick with which to compare local music, but on the other hand they complained if local music sounded too “American”.

Negus (1996, p. 174) argues that, in addition to dominating radio stations and sales charts, international music also becomes the “dominant particular” against which other sounds are assessed and around which world production and consumption of music become organised”. A classic example illustrating this was a comment made by Nomthandazo from School C: “And as for [local] R&B and all that, I think it is just too American. ’Cause if you listen to American R&B it actually talks to you […] It really says something, but this R&B in South Africa it doesn’t say anything” (Nomthandazo, School C, 2003).

Another of the contradictions that was evident in the interview was that bands were seen as inferior if they had not made it internationally, but if they had broken into the international market, they risked losing at least some of their fan base in South Africa, who felt that they had “sold out” and could no longer be considered local.

These findings indicate that South African artists tread a very difficult line. On the one hand the respondents measure local bands and musicians against international acts and want them to be as good as international acts, but on the other hand they want them to retain something distinctly “South African”.

**SEGMENTATION OF THE MARKET**

One of the legacies of apartheid is the separation of music into genres that were pitched at certain segments of the market. This seems to be an international trend, Hebdige (1979), Negus (1996) and Frith (1978) all theorise about the way that the media contribute to social divisions by aiming their publications at a specific audience, while making no attempt to create a multicultural audience. Frith argues that this attempts to “freeze the audience into a series of market tastes” (Frith 1978, p. 208).

This segmentation of the market was clear in responses to the questionnaire. The respondents were asked which genres of music they listen to.
R&B was the overall favourite genre and was selected by 48.5% of the respondents as one of their favourite genres of music and rock music followed. However, when comparing the results by school, R&B was the favourite genre of the majority of respondents from school A, B and C and by far fewer respondents from school D and E. Conversely, the genre of rock was selected as a favourite genre by the majority of respondents from school D and E. However, far fewer of respondents from school B, school C and school A selected rock as one of their favourite genres.

Put simply, the respondents from school B and school A generally listened to different genres of music to the respondents from school D and school E, while respondents from School C displayed more of a variety of answers across the different genres. When considering these results in light of the racial demographics of the schools, the difference was noticeable. School C displayed a variety of responses as the racial demographic of the school was the most mixed. School E and school D were almost exclusively “white”, while school C and school A had no “white” learners.

This segmentation of the market was discussed in the interviews. In general, most of the respondents felt that different genres of music should be played on different radio stations for two reasons; firstly, listeners who enjoy a certain genre of music will know where to find it. The second reason was rooted in their dislike for other styles of music and in some cases respondents displayed a lack of tolerance for “the other”. Stewart from school E commented: “Well, if they want to hear *kwaito* then they must listen to another radio station, because other stations play it – so leave 5fm and let them play what they want to” (Stewart, School E, 2003).
However, there was also evidence of support and a tangible desire among some of the respondents to be introduced to other genres of music. As Stembiso from school C pointed out: “Radio should, I don’t know, try and play at least one or two songs from different racial groups just to let the guys know, and to be aware that they are out there” (Stembiso, School C, 2003).

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study discovered that although over half of the respondents view South African music in a positive light, this results in little support for local music. International music is the “dominant particular” against which other sounds are assessed” (Negus 1996, p. 174), and feelings of cultural inferiority for local products still exist. Furthermore, there is a definite segmentation of the market into “race” groups, but there is a desire from the respondents to be exposed to music of other genres.

The implications of this study on the local music industry are substantial. Musicians require the support of the public in order to make a living, and without support for the local music industry, local products and culture will not thrive. As this research was undertaken in 2004, it offers many possibilities for current research. The influence of the emergence of digital music on the local music industry could be considered as well as the current perceptions towards local popular music.

Finally, it is important to note that this research is by no means the final word on the issue of perceptions of local music in Durban. Perceptions change, music changes, bands change, the media change and preferences change. As Christina Williams (2001, p. 225) says: “People move in and out of subcultures and in and out of fandom”.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**ENDNOTES**

1. *Lekker* is an Afrikaans word meaning “tasty” or “enjoyable”. The phrase “local is lekker” refers to a marketing slogan widely used to promote South African products.
2. Durban is the second largest city in South Africa and is located on the East coast.

**REFERENCES**
