

AN EXCLUSIVE REPORT BY MIDEM

REPORT

THE GLOBALISATION OF LOCAL GENRES

—
A DIGITAL-AGE
PHENOMENON



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THE GLOBALISATION OF LOCAL GENRES – A DIGITAL-AGE PHENOMENON

Jeruselema, the catchy South African hit recorded in the Zulu language, is a global sensation thanks to its talented creators, and also to the distribution efficiency of international streaming platforms, social media and other sharing-enabled digital media like TikTok.

Recorded by local producer Master KG and distributed internationally by Africori, a Warner Music Group subsidiary, the hymn-like track is at the forefront of an undeniably exhilarating new movement – the globalisation of local music genres.

Streaming services, from Spotify, Apple Music to Deezer and Twitch, are introducing fans worldwide to indigenous music exported from Africa, Asia, Latin America, continental Europe.

In addition to broadening the already accessible repertoire, mostly English-language worldwide hits from major Western economies, the global streams of myriad foreign-language creations could be revolutionising what we listen to.

Justin Bieber has been seen dancing to Latin America's cumbia genre

at festivals; Snoop Dogg has worked with Nigerian star D'Banj, and had a hit (Qué Maldición) with Regional Mexican band group La Banda MS.

Also boosting the multi-cultural melting pot are foreign-language collaborations with or remixes by big-name Western international stars like Damon Albarn, P Diddy, Stormzy, Drake, Sam Smith, Snoop Dogg and Coldplay's Chris Martin.

In an industry where Spotify has declared the traditional Top 40 music-sales charts are turning into the Top 43,000 streamed songs, expect to see more fans dancing to the groove of a multi-lingual beat.

As Yoel Kenan, Africori's CEO/founder, says about the role of streaming services: "I think we need to give them a lot of credit. They have a number of people on the ground across the continent. They have played an important role in resonating new genres and artists."

THE JERUSALEMA PHENOM – A CASE STUDY

Recorded with the vocals of fast-emerging South African sing-

er Nomcebo, Jeruselema was produced by Master KG's own label Open Mic Productions and released end of 2019. It became a local hit via YouTube, was picked up by Africori, which licensed it to Elektra Warner France for international distribution in July 2020.

By September 2020, Shazam, the music-discovery app belonging to Apple, declared Jeruselema the world's most searched-for song worldwide for several weeks. By December, the music video had 265 million-plus YouTube views, been streamed 100 million-plus times on Spotify, and hit the No1 spot in several European charts. The #Jerusalem hashtag boasts more than 657 million mentions on TikTok.

Master KG has seen his Spotify listeners soar to more than 8 million; he has been interviewed on BBC national radio stations in the UK.

In December, he made history when he became the first-ever African act to collect France's prestigious NRJ Award as Jeruselema clinched the International Song of the Year gong.

Phiona Okumu, who is Head of Music Sub-Saharan Africa

at Spotify, observed the song's impact as an anthem for these challenging pandemic times: "Somehow, within this Covid crisis, I feel it was connecting with people's need to feel good, optimistic and upbeat. That is where it really took off and that is what I mean when I say we are going to move away from genres and really focus on how the music moves you."

THE AFRICANA BEAT

Jeruselema's triumph is not an off-beat occurrence. A host of recordings in African languages, dialects and slangs is winning international fans at a rate unimaginable even 10 years ago.

The afrobeat sound invented by Nigerian star Fela Kuti during the 1970s and 1980s has given birth to a universe called afrobeats, which comprises different sub-genres that include Afrofusion, Afrohouse, Afroswing, Afrobashment, the Caribbean-influenced Afrobbean music, AfroLatin, and the UK-originated Afrotrap.

They are cross-pollinating with other original African music, including

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coupé-décalé from Côte d'Ivoire, Angola's kuduro, gogohoun from Benin, and the Uganda-originated kadodi percussions. The hip hop and dancehall-influenced genge and its offshoot gengetone were born in Kenya.

"These genres are getting global recognition," states Derek Dubru, co-founder of the Uganda-based Nyege Nyege music collective that includes labels and a festival.

"I think a lot of the indigenous forms of African electronic music are so much in conversation with electron-



ic dance music (EDM) as considered in the West, they naturally resonate with all dancers and electronic music lovers."

That stance is supported by Lagos-based Kareem Mobolaji (Bolaji), owner of Nigerian distributor Ingle Mind Digital Concept, and Regional Head West Africa for US music group Empire.

Empire's encourages international afrobeats collaborations. Think of Blow My Mind, a 2019 track by Nigerian star Davido and US rapper Chris Brown; or Temptation, a 2020 recording by afrobeats dynamo Tiwa Savage and British pop star Sam Smith.

"Very soon, all over the world, afrobeats are going to be genres for which Nigerians will no longer need to offer an explanation," Bolaji declares while referring to Billboard magazine featuring Tiwa Savage, Davido and Mr Eazi on its front cover earlier this year.

Bolaji hopes to use his Empire appointment to help up-and-coming African acts to understand their worth ("Don't give away your masters").

He also advises them to appreciate the marketing value of digital tech and media, especially as that allowed many artists to stay engaged with fans worldwide when live concerts were cancelled during Covid-19 quarantines.

"It helped artists understand why they need to view their numbers, why they need to engage with their followers and why they need to understand that music does not start and stop by just jumping on a live stage."

GO EAST, AFRICAN-MUSIC FANS

For Derek Dubru, who launched the Nyege Nyege music venture that includes the popular Nyege Nyege festival (which has collaborated with Midem), the Afrobeats phenomenon is just a tip of the iceberg carrying African local genres abroad.

He mentions Otim Alpha, the Uganda artist famous for melding traditional music with electronic dance sounds, working with British hitmaker Damon Albarn. Kenyan star Slikback gets a mention in an articles about the Best DJ Mixes in Pitchfork, the

leading US online music magazine.

He points to the international influence these creations are having. Portuguese DJ/producer Branko includes Angolan sounds in his works. Japanese DJ Keito mixes the South African genre gqom into his recordings. Meanwhile, UK EDM star Rian Treanor is renowned for adopting singeli, a Tanzanian street musical creation.

"Things are in a big flux and the next Big Sound is probably being cooked up in a tiny studio somewhere we don't suspect, which is why these times seem so exciting for the African scene," Dubru adds.

AFRICANS AND AMERICANS

Local African music's impact can be felt in the US, the world's biggest music market by revenues.

South Africa-based Thabiso Khathi highlights Babes Wodumo's contribution to the official soundtrack of Black Panther, Hollywood's multi-billion-dollar Marvel superhero blockbuster movie. Famous for her local hits in the South African famed gqom genre, she has been

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nominated for the popular US music-business prize, the BET Awards.

Singer-songwriter/rapper Sho Madjozi, another South African star who melds gqom with hip hop, has been snapped up by Sony Music Entertainment's Epic Records.

For Khati, a former Universal Music Group Africa director who launched his own artist-management firm The T-Effect in January 2020, their achievements confirm the still untapped potential of Africa.

"Africa is like going into a resource-filled land that has not been mined. But what is missing there is the know-how to mine the resources. Once you are able to bring the expertise, you are going to open an endless pool of revenue."

That outlook is permeating the US, argues Tuma Basa, Director, Black Music & Culture at YouTube, Google's mega video-sharing platform with 2 billion-plus registered users worldwide.

The Nigerian diaspora in the US and the children of African immigrants are introducing made-in-Africa mu-

sic to other Americans, while US DJs are infusing afrobeats into their performances, he states.

Nigerian superstar and Grammy winner Burna Boy has collaborated with US producer/entrepreneur P Diddy; Tiwa Savage has appeared on a leading US TV chat show, The Tonight Show with Starring Jimmy Fallon; young New Yorkers cannot get enough of the Afrowave pro-



Thabiso Khati

ductions from Afro B, the British DJ of Ivorian descent; and the parents of Kanye West's manager Abou "Bu" Thiam (a former Vice President of A&R at Def Jam) and his brother, rap star/music entrepreneur Akon, are from Senegal.

YouTube itself is riding the Afro wave, having launched the YouTube Music in Nigeria this year.

"African music has entered the American palette," Basa adds. "From YouTube's perspective, a lot of the consumption is by children of African immigrants and their friends. These are children that have assimilated in the US; they are African Americans. This is the generation of the American Dream 2.0."

TOP OF THE K-POPS AND OTHER ASIAN SUCCESSES

Artists from different regions could learn from the mind-blowing achievements of K-pop, the Korean-language music performed by photogenic, wholesomely presented dancing singers who have some of the world's most passionate fans.

As Danny Lee, Chief Agent at Asian Agent, the Los Angeles-based music-management and label consulting firm, reminds us, K-pop has been around for ages.

But in the past decade alone, it has grown into an unstoppable global juggernaut. Forbes magazine recently noted that BTS, the septet that make up K-pop's biggest band, have not only topped Billboard's Hot 100 singles chart and Top 200 albums chart several times, they accounted for half the No.1 songs on Billboard's new Global 200 chart.

"K-pop is more than just a genre," emphasises Lee, whose clients have included YG Entertainment and BEAT Interactive. "It's really a 360 product, which includes audio components, but a lot of its content comes from visual deliveries. What really separates K-pop idols from other global artists is the level of engagement they have with their fans. Consistent content and communication are key."

In addition to BTS, K-pop stars like Blackpink, (G)I-DLE, ATEEZ and Twice have also signed partnerships

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with major US labels such as Columbia Records, Republic Records and RCA Records.

“According to Twitter, the US, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina are in the Top 10 countries by tweet volume related to K-pop. So, four of the Top 10 are from the Americas,” Lee adds.

Local music from other Asian countries, such as Japan and India, are also enjoying their moment on the world’s stage.

But some recent surprises have come from Vietnam, after Ghen Cô Vy (Jealous Coronavirus), also known as the Washing Hand Song, by MIN X ERIK created a global buzz. It has clocked about 41 million TikTok views.

The remixed version of a 2009 Indonesian hit called Bagaikan Langit by Indonesian group Putih Abu-Abu accumulated more than 9 million views and inspired some 163,000 creations for a TikTok video challenge.

From China, an ancient Mandarin track called One Cut Blossom by Fei Yu Qing, which was used in two different TikTok hashtag challenges,

peaked at No.1 on the Spotify Viral 50 charts in Europe and New Zealand, and garnered 30 million video views in the US and another 6 million views in the UK.

THE DESPACITO EFFECT JUST GOT DEEPER

The 2017 Spanish-language reggaeton/Latin pop uber hit Despacito topped the sales charts in numerous countries and broke records on YouTube, including the first video to nab 7 billion-plus views.

Since then, it has been joined by a throng of Spanish-first acts from Latin America and Hispanic United States. These include Colombia’s J Balvin and Puerto Rican Bad Bunny, who is Spotify’s most-streamed artist in 2020.

“Latin Music has become so incredibly popular globally due to the kaleidoscope of rhythmic beats and catchy upbeat vibe. It has never really mattered if the lyrics were in English, Spanish, Portuguese or all three,” offers Miami-based Mary Nuñez, Warner Chappell Music’s Vice President,

Sync US Latin & Latin America.

“Creative and experimental sounds have resonated over the past 20 years and the digital era has only accelerated this process for younger audiences to discover new music, artists and eras.”

She notes the growing export of Latin-electro fusion from Latin American writers/producers like Argentina-originated Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, as well as Illya Kuryaki and the Valderramas.

Equally in demand are Latin-electro creators on Warner Chappell’s roster, like Mexico’s Gran Sur, Chile’s Rubio and Lunay from Puerto Rico. Their works are being discovered by fans as global streaming-TV platforms, from Netflix to Disney+, use their music for soundtracks.

Nuñez adds: “The investment and growth for sync will continue to be in Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu & Disney because audiences are in more places than ever before. Having the right metrics from our streaming partners has been a huge positive help for signing the new sounds and what is next.”

Alex Mizrahi, founder/CEO of Miami-based Seitrack US, a label-management-concert promotion venture, explains how local Latin genres like Regional Mexican music are founded in centuries’ old traditional sounds fused with edgy contemporary hip-hop rhythms, rap vocals and/or electronic-dance percussions.

Seitrack’s roster features multiple-awards winners from Mexico like Alejandro Fernández, “the biggest Mexican Regional-Music ambassador worldwide”; the cumbia-influenced Los Ángeles Azules; and 21-year-old Christian Nodal.

It is Nodal’s success (he has collected three Latin Grammy Awards, two Billboard Latin Music Awards, one Lo Nuestro Award and one Latin American Music Award) that confirms Regional Mexican joins reggaeton, Latin rap and urbano in taking Spanish-speaking exports to a wider audience.

“He is like the ambassador of this new sound, which kicked in during 2017 and he is selling in every Hispanic market in America, Europe and globally,” Mizrahi says.

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CUMBIA DANCE WITH ME

Of the different Latin American sub-genres, cumbia stems from a multi-cultural traditional folk dance that is taking today's music fans by storm.

Grégoire Bouquet is co-founder of Boa Viagem Music, a Paris and Buenos Aires-based booking-management agency specialising in digital cumbia and Latin urban beats.

His company and indie label ZZK Records have grown on the back of an insatiable demand for cumbia acts like Argentinians El Hijo de la Cumbia, Chancha Via Circuito, and Da-

mas Gratis; Chico Trujillo from Chile, the late Mexican star Celso Piña, Peruvian band Los Mirlos, and the irrepressible 80-year-old Colombian diva Totó la Momposina.

They are firm favourites at European festivals like Roskilde in Denmark, Babel Med Music (Babel Music XP) in France or Exit Festival in Serbia.

As Bouquet observes: "In Mexico, Argentina or Chile, cumbia has long been adapted to more contemporary genres, such as rock, reggae, hip hop and electro. I think this mix with electro and global bass, sounds already known to Europeans, made the cumbia more digestible when it came time to hit the dance floors."

Grant C Dull, Director at Buenos Aires-based digital cumbia specialist ZZK Records, which includes Nicola Cruz and Dengue Dengue Dengue on its roster, agrees.

"We focused on cumbia and folklore, as they were the most exciting experiments coming out of our club nights. The mash-up and mix-up of the past, present and future: we were able to find the sweet spot where the two intersect and make you dance."



Celso Piña



Totó la Momposina

Photo: Ignacio Nacho



Chico Trujillo

Photo: Micky Aguirre



Grant C Dull

STREAMING RUNS THROUGH LOCAL GENRES

Everyone agrees the global streaming services, social media and content-sharing platforms like TikTok and Triller have been instrumental to the burgeoning export of a highly diversified multi-cultural portfolio of music.

As Asian Agent's Danny Lee points out about K-pop international invasion: "We're now in a time where we have multiple global distribution platforms that are more accessible, for both the artist and consumer."

For Marcos Juarez, Head of Latin at

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pioneering US streaming platform Pandora, the overseas consumption of Afro Latin and similar genres owes much to the gifted local do-it-yourself artists combined with their access to digital distribution.

This inspired Pandora to launch a host of Afro Latin music stations this summer in recognition of Africa's entrenched influence on Latin American music.

He highlights local artists from Columbia's Caribbean coast and similar regions. Lalo Ebratt, Yera and Nobeat from the port city of Santa Maria, plus Beéle and Dekko from the coastal city Barranquilla, among others, have now found homes at major record labels.

Juarez says: "As one artist, and then another, begins to draw the attention of new listeners and the industry, the visibility of other artists from that region is amplified."

This makes life easier for the creative contribution streaming platforms make, he adds. "If I'm doing my job well, I'm just reflecting the diversity of what's out there. I want to ensure that, no matter your taste, you can find what you are looking for."

TO BE ON SPOTIFY'S RADAR

In March 2020, the world's largest streaming-music service Spotify launched RADAR, an emerging artist program spotlighting rising talent from around the globe.

"Six months after its launch, RADAR's artists have collectively generated over 2 billion streams, 100-plus million hours of listening and 112 million-plus listeners from 92 markets," says Wissam Khodur, who handles Artist Label & Partnerships at Spotify in the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

With Egyptian pop star Amr Diab getting most streams from the US, Sweden and Germany, promotion campaigns for his music have included a Spotify billboard on New York's famous Time Square.

A RADAR collaboration hit like Save Me, by Dubai-based UK electronic-dance duo Hollaphonic and Lebanese singer Xriss, RADAR's first artists, has been heard in far-flung markets like the US, Brazil, Germany, Canada and Australia. "Through RADAR, Save Me was able to transcend to a wider audience beyond the region," Khodur adds.

Supported by Spotify's Arab X playlist, which amplifies global crossover songs by and with Arab artists, you will see some of the most talented names such as Bahjat, Issam El-najjar and Felukah doing business on a multi-territory basis.

Wissam's colleague Phiona Okumu, Head of Music for the sub-Saharan Africa region, says they do more than just scout talent to add



Phiona Okumu

to Spotify's African Heat playlist. Her team opt to be hands-on when they notice the emergence of a new popular sound, like the South African dance music amapiano.

"It is the biggest sound in South Africa right now; it is reminiscent of when South Africa was producing kwaito music in the 1990s. It is also becoming popular in the US, UK and Germany," she says.

"We went to South Africa in June in 2019 because we had noticed this community of artists who produced at an incredible speed. The purpose of us going was to make them aware that they have amazing music, and they can make money from it as well as their gigs."

She mentions acts such as DJ Maphorisa and Kabza De Small as amapiano artists destined to be huge internationally. Other African performers she admires include Mali's Oumou Sangare, Nigerian alte R&B singer-songwriter Tems, and R&B singer Elaine, a RADAR alumnus from South Africa, who was signed by Columbia Records in August 2020.

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GO EAST, EUROPEAN MUSIC FANS

Cast your eyes east on continental Europe and artists singing in Russian, Ukrainian and Estonian have become multi-territory music idols via YouTube, Facebook and TikTok.

Russian band Little Big have clocked 483 million views for their music video Skibidi. "Due to this success, they can book many gigs in Europe," notes Zsolt Jeges, president of the Hungarian Association of Independent Labels and specialist in Central and Eastern European music via his Hamburg-based consultancy Atomic CEE.

The inventive video for Knock Knock, a track by Ukrainian group Brunettes Shoot Blondes, reports 16 million views. A chance appearance of a track called Atoms, by Hungarian band Platon Karataev, on a Spotify playlist generated more than 600,000 active listeners at one point.

Jeges says he also noted a huge explosion of TikTok users in Hungary during the quarantines enforced by the current pandemic.

New-generation marketing platforms like TikTok have added another substantial but authentic level to what digital media can do for local artists globally, declares Ole Obermann, TikTok's Global Head of Music.

"When YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music opened the world up, you saw K-pop, for example, start to travel and you saw a lot of Latin repertoire travelling worldwide with Despacito. I think TikTok takes it to another level," he says.

The key difference between platforms like TikTok and the streaming services, he argues, is the ability TikTok gives to each song's original creator, the community of other creators and user-generated content to add more accessible visuals to the track, via dance challenges, hashtags or remixes.

"If you are listening to a playlist or the radio and a song in Korean comes on and you don't understand it, you might like the harmony and rhythm, but you can't relate to it because you can't understand the lyrics," he says.

"If you then have the original creator putting another layer of storytelling that is visual, you can still connect with that song in a way you would not have done otherwise."

LYRICS

No matter the language, what is a song without lyrics? Canada-headquartered LyricFind has positioned itself as the global market leader in authorised lyrics licensing and monetisation, which has helped boost income for songwriters and publishers via cross-cultural collaborations. After translating the Top 100 Billboard and global charts hits since January 2019, LyricFind is scheduled to launch a platform for generating professionally translated lyrics via a partnership with video-subtitling tech company Dotsub.

"LyricFind knew the value of understanding lyrics across languages and the potential for fans, songwriters, music publishers, labels, artists, platforms and the company," says Robert Singerman, LyricFind's Senior Vice President, International Publishing.

"The meaning of the lyrics activates a different part of the brain than the sound of the music, or the melody of the lyrics. Lyrics actually engage different hormonal responses and, yes, are extremely important for exporting music across languages."

He asks us to look at the effectiveness of YouTube's closed captions on music videos. "All those multilingual songs, artistic collaborations or not, coming from "Spanglish" to Afrobeats, to J-Pop, T-Pop, Mandopop, K-Pop, I-Pop and even Anglo Pop music; you can see the need for understanding lyrics across languages. Streaming services are and will continue to be making lyric translations more and more of a priority".

Accessing creativity in other local languages and cultures will inspire more innovation in international music making, Warner Chappell's Mary Nuñez says. "In the era of Covid-19, Latin American producers and writers will become more experimental, which means more global collaborations hopefully with other continents such as Africa and Asia."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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