

Music is a DIY operation for R&B, hiphop and electronic artists in Mozambique's capital **Maputo**

where local styles are being adapted for global ears. By **Tom Faber**



**“Most of the times** when I travel to South Africa they ask me: ‘What about the scene?’ Man, I’m not sure Mozambique even has a scene,” sighs Nandele, foremost beatmaker of Maputo, the Mozambican capital. To an outsider this may not be a surprise: Mozambique doesn’t feature much in Western news these days. After almost 500 years of Portuguese colonial control, it was immediately embroiled in a brutal 15 year civil war. Though it’s been relatively stable for 25 years now, it remains overlooked in terms of tourism and culture. You wouldn’t expect a scene, but you’d find one: a profusion of concerts, club and street parties that fill the coastal city with sound and light every weekend. Considering this, Nandele qualifies: “Actually, what we don’t have is an industry.”

“We don’t have managers or any structure,” expands promoter Evaristo de Abreu. “Artists have to do everything themselves: produce, mix, make posters, organise their own concerts. That’s a lot of work – and then on top of that they have to be creative.” Indeed, many of the country’s biggest stars are independent: they may have a team, but they don’t belong to a label. Artists have to hustle: prominent rappers sell their CDs in person around slum neighbourhoods, or accept phone credit as payment for singles available to download. “We have the creative side but not the business side,” adds de Abreu. But today he and others understand just making music isn’t enough. They need to build a healthy musical ecosystem to support the artists of the future.

One venue looking to change things is 16Neto, where he programmes events in a detached building in the leafy, upscale neighbourhood of Polana that serves as a co-working space and gallery by day and a concert venue by night. Partially funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 16Neto gives young musicians their first opportunities to hone their craft and reach wider audiences. This is a rare platform for new artists in a city where bookers mostly

rely on the same artists to draw a crowd every week.

R&B artist Tégui is one of the venue’s signature acts. She played her first show here and then released an album featuring collaborations with several 16Neto alumni on which she sings in English, Portuguese, and her mother’s local language, Bitonga. “I was the second act ever to play here,” she says, “this is my home.” De Abreu trawls through the SoundCloud followers of young Mozambican artists to find fresh talent to come and perform. They may go on to release music themselves or be picked up by Kongoloti, Mozambique’s only independent label for alternative music. He co-organises the intimate Pfhuka Sessions on Sundays, but 16Neto artists are hot property elsewhere – in one day I caught one of them performing at Mozambique Fashion Week while others staged a raucous hiphop party downtown.

Across town in gritty Baixa, on a street notorious for drunks, police hassle and prostitution, is the tasteful new hipster bar Ficka. The initiative of DJ, music manager and event producer Filipa Mondlane, this space is a cafe by day and spotlights electronic music with Thursday night parties. Mondlane focuses specifically on offering a stage for female DJs but, she tells me, “there aren’t that many that feel ready to play. I have a few regulars but some weeks it’s just me and two other dudes, which breaks my heart.” Her other aim is to bring professionalism to the Maputo music scene: “Mozambicans party like crazy, but our events are so badly produced.” Issues with sound, scheduling and even power cuts are common.

At Associação dos Músicos Moçambicanos, or the Mozambican Music Association, you can hear styles of music specific to the country. These are primarily marrabenta, Latin-flavoured band music popular in the mid-20th century, and pandza, its tougher, electronic descendent which references hiphop and ragga. At the Thursday night jam session musicians offer a panorama of Mozambican music: one moment an avant

jazz trumpet solo, the next someone playing mbira with all the swagger of a rocker shredding on guitar. If there is a common factor to Mozambique’s music, it is a sweetness and ease, reflecting their paradisiacal coastlines (if not their troubled history) and a far cry from the menacing ggom of Durban, 300 miles away.

But on Maputo’s downtown streets, cars blast out the latest dance tracks from abroad in styles such as amapiano, kizomba, zouk and kuduro. “We take a lot of things from outside,” says de Abreu, in particular from South Africa and the Lusophone countries Angola, Brazil and Cape Verde. “That’s the fight here, people don’t give value – not just to our music – but to our culture in general.” This is partly due to the Eurocentric upbringing of Maputo’s creative crowd, but more broadly the insidious, continuing aftershocks of colonial rule, which violently curbed all forms of national expression. “This is the impact of colonialism here,” says Tégui. “They were like: you can’t use your culture. Some slaves were educated and ‘civilised’, but our names were changed, our rituals were forbidden... there’s a shame of our culture.” Outside the capital, it’s less pronounced, and pandza, marrabenta and local hiphop are heard more frequently.

De Abreu believes that Maputo’s artists need to dig into Mozambique’s unique musical DNA to succeed overseas. “For me the perfect example is the Nigerians,” he argues. “They said: let’s explore our specific sound and make it global. Now they’re popping worldwide.” Already several alternative artists from Maputo, including Nandele, Trkz and Mapiko Mweya, are incorporating local rhythm patterns into their work. Fu Da Siderurgia, a beatmaker and bandmate of Nandele, supports this mission to breathe new life into specifically Mozambican music. “We have a platinum mine of sounds here,” he declares. “Our ancestors invented instruments with no chromatic scales, that were just governed by feeling. All we need is to dig into it and research. It’ll be a kind of revolution.” □

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