

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Gavin Steingo, Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). pp. 320.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24v9q5jd>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 41(2)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Cox, Laura

**Publication Date**

2020

**DOI**

10.5070/F7412046841

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 2020 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

## **Book Reviews**



Gavin Steingo, *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). pp. 320.

Laura Cox

In *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*, Gavin Steingo reinterprets kwaito as “less the name of a musical genre than a particular arrangement of sensory experience.”<sup>1</sup> Kwaito, South Africa’s electronic variant of house music, became popular among urban youth in the nineties. It has been the target of ire from politicians and public commentators for its ostensible apolitical undertones and for its reflection of juvenile apathy toward social and political issues. Instead, Steingo proposes that kwaito musicians and fans deliberately use sensory perception to remove themselves from their material conditions. In a post-apartheid landscape of unfulfilled egalitarianism, music becomes an apparatus through which to imagine freedom. Combining ethnomusicology and archival research with oral interviews, *Kwaito's Promise* is an insightful and convincing meditation of a musical style that “suspends normative modalities of hearing and knowing.”<sup>2</sup>

Steingo segments *Kwaito's Promise* into seven chapters that elaborate on the creation, distribution, and experience of kwaito. Chapter one criticizes music study theory for its elitism and introduces readers to the emancipatory appeal of kwaito. According to Steingo, kwaito’s ability to cloak dismal social and economic conditions is precisely what makes it political. Chapter two serves as a backdrop to the style’s emergence in South Africa: the most historical in content, this chapter examines the importation of international house music, the ancestor of kwaito, that South African DJs diffused among the public in the eighties. Chapter three examines the three major channels—record labels (“stables”), radio stations, and the television series *Yizo Yizo*—primarily responsible for transmitting kwaito to a national audience.<sup>3</sup> For example, Steingo writes that *Yizo Yizo*, a show featuring cameos from kwaito musicians, “blurs the boundary between music and nonmusic, life and representation, reality and dream,” elements reminiscent of kwaito itself.<sup>4</sup>

The remainder of the chapters dissect contemporary kwaito from a spatial and material standpoint. Chapter four analyzes how stationary Sowetan musicians, fearful of home robberies, eagerly

guard their worn and unreliable recording equipment, yet they loan these coveted devices to fellow artists. Thus, kwaito is both a contained and collective process, as new blends borne by trading and swapping equipment add idiosyncratic inflections, flairs, and rhythms to pre-recorded beats. Chapter five delves into “acoustic assemblages,” or the influence of the “temporal, spatial, [and] cosmological” in musical production.<sup>5</sup> Taken to mean the external and prosaic forces shaping music, standout examples include whistling and animal noises, just some of the many sounds incorporated into the melodies of kwaito.<sup>6</sup> As musicians traverse the globe to bring kwaito to foreign audiences, Steingo demonstrates that amateur and professional artists enhance its tune both domestically and abroad. Chapters six and seven concern the spread of kwaito through a black middle-class known as “black diamonds” and the primary locations in which it is heard: taverns, outdoor functions, and vehicles.<sup>7</sup> As kwaito permeates city centers through black urban migration or echoes through car stereos, its resonances tap into a world beyond current social and material realities.

For all the revelations about kwaito attained in this perceptive monograph, the text falters in one primary respect: As a style predominantly attractive to urban youth, Steingo fails to extensively engage with how age impacts the embrace of kwaito’s aesthetic. He frequently highlights space and city dwellers, a very rich discussion indeed, but does not tie kwaito back to the generation that it largely appeals to. Considering how foregrounded ethnographic fieldwork is in *Kwaito’s Promise*, this absence is curious. An analysis of youth and its implications for musical tastes and preferences, forms of political engagement, and visions of freedom adds an incisive dimension to the creation and enjoyment of kwaito. Further, kwaito might be used to examine divides in intergenerational imaginings of hope and change in South Africa. Age thus would have added nuance to the sensory indulgence in kwaito.

*Kwaito’s Promise* offers readers a stimulating perspective of music culture and places it appropriately within the context of South Africa. Steingo examines socioeconomic strain, high rates of unemployment, inclusion and exclusion, and the politics of space to capture the process of creation. As urban youth culture forges a multi-dimensional reality accessible through sound, Steingo encourages readers to imagine a brighter future, a promise of freedom that is elusive, but looming on the post-apartheid horizon.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Gavin Steingo, *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 161.

