

Interrogating the Own:
A Practice-based, Auto-ethnographic Reflection on
Musical Creation with Reference to the Work of
Abdullah Ibrahim, Zim Ngqawana and Kyle Shepherd

By Kyle Shepherd



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Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Stellenbosch University

Supervisor: Dr Stephanie Vos
Co-supervisors: Prof. Stephanus Muller, Dr Jonathan Eato

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis examines my artistic practice as musician, improviser and composer as a research process. Auto-ethnographic reflections on my performances, whether on the jazz bandstand, in the recording studio or in informal improvisation sessions, enable me to illuminate and analyse the artistic process, thereby contributing to artistic research in jazz.

Discussions of practice-based research (also known as artistic research) and auto-ethnography as methods serve as theoretical points of departure. I situate this study as practice-based research, and argue that auto-ethnography offers a particularly suitable mode to reflect on the deeply individual nature of improvisation as an exploration and realization of the self.

In the first chapter, I explore the processes of learning, transmission and artistic development in jazz practice, particularly with reference to two musicians who shaped my artistic development, Abdullah Ibrahim and Zim Ngqawana. Situated outside of formal institutions, the artistic development I describe emerges as an improvisatory process in itself, since musicians select their own musical models and influences to hone their practice.

The second chapter presents a reflection on the processes involved in creating my practice of improvising, composing and performing. I consider the importance of what I call a situational awareness, and the different dynamics and challenges inherent in three modes of my work: solo playing, ensemble playing, and film music composition.

In the third chapter, I explore how the above influences and dynamics (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2) come into play in the performance portfolio that forms the practical component of this degree. This thesis, therefore, forms one component of a practice-based Masters degree, which compliments and expands the performance portfolio submitted.

Opsomming

In hierdie tesis ondersoek ek my kunspraktyk as musikus, improviseerder en komponis as navorsingsproses. ‘n Outo-etnografiese besinning oor my uitvoerings, synde op die jazz podium, in die opname ateljee of in informele improvisasie sessies, stel my in staat om die artistieke proses te belig en te analiseer, en daardeur ‘n bydrae te maak tot artistieke navorsing oor jazz.

As ‘n teoretiese vertrekpunt, bespreek ek praktyk-gebaseerde navorsing (ook bekend as artistieke navorsing) en outo-etnografie as metodologieë. Ek stel die studie bekend as praktyk-gebaseerde navorsing, en argumenteer dat outo-etnografie ‘n gepaste modus is om die individuele aard van improvisasie as verkenning en vergestaltung van die self, te ondersoek.

In Hoofstuk 1 verken ek leer-, oordrag- en artistieke ontwikkelingsprosesse in jazz-praktyk, met besondere verwysing na twee musikante wat vormend was vir my eie artistieke ontwikkeling, naamlik Abdullah Ibrahim en Zim Ngqawana. Die artistieke ontwikkeling wat ek beskryf, wat dikwels buite formele instansies plaasvind, is ‘n improvisatoriese proses op sigself, aangesien die musikus sy eie musikale modelle, invloede en leerprosesse bepaal.

Die tweede hoofstuk is ‘n besinning oor my eie improvisasie-, komposisie- en uitvoeringspraktyk as proses. Ek ondersoek die belang ‘n “omgewingsbewussyn”, en die onderskeie dinamika en uitdagings in drie modusse waarin ek werk: solospel, ensemble spel en filmmusiek komposisie.

In die derde hoofstuk bespreek ek hoe die bogenoemde invloede en dinamika (soos bespreek in Hoofstukke 1 en 2) inspeel op die uitvoeringsportefeulje wat ek inhandig as die praktiese komponent van hierdie graad. Hierdie tesis is derhalwe een komponent van ‘n praktyk-gebaseerde Meestersgraad, wat die ander komponent, die uitvoeringsportefeulje, uitbou en komplimenteer.

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Introduction

This thesis presents an auto-ethnographic reflection on artistic development, composition and improvisation from my perspective as a practising composer and musician. For more than a decade, I have been active as a performer, improviser and recording artist, producer and artistic director, resulting in six albums and numerous performances. More recently, I began writing film music. South African jazz post-1960 was a seminal shaping force in my development as a composer and performer. The pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and saxophonist Zim Ngqawana were particularly influential figures in my music practice. In this reflection on my own artistic processes, practice and its development, I revisit and further engage with the work of Ibrahim and Ngqawana, thereby reflecting on processes of learning and transmission, and also of honing one's own artistic voice.

This thesis constitutes a written reflection on the ideas developed over the course of my career; ideas that are put into practice in the performances that constitute the other component of this degree. This relationship between music practice and reflection is a central theme in this thesis. At the core of my writing is an interest not in the specifics of the “how to” of the creative process, but rather a reflection on the process of development as an accumulation of influences, study, interpretation and assimilation. The works and practices of Ibrahim and Ngqawana are suited to my interests, as I view these musicians as highly individual and original artists who have, over the course of their careers, forged a personal approach to their music. My engagement with the work of these musicians has fuelled my interest in “jazz as process”. This concept suggests that jazz composition, improvisation and ultimately artistry constitute an ongoing process of development within an artist. I am particularly interested in how Ibrahim and Ngqawana set out to explore their own musical boundaries or “sound worlds” within which to express their ideas, and in tracing the phases evident through the course of their careers. My consideration of their careers in the first chapter of the thesis serves as a counterfoil for reflection on my own development as an improviser/composer in the second chapter.

I address the artistic processes within my own work, but also consider it as a continuation of the lineage laid down by Ibrahim and Ngqawana. Artistic lineage in jazz is a very important mode of knowledge transmission, of learning techniques, of finding and shaping one's artistic voice as well as "rite of passage" (Berliner 1994: 136-8; also see Muller and Benjamin 2011: 98-99). Monk came from¹ Ellington, Bud Powell came from Monk, Miles came from Dizzy and Trane came from Lester Young and Bird. By this token, I come from the "school" of Ibrahim and Ngqawana and am a continuation of that lineage. My study of Ibrahim and Ngqawana, along with the interrogation of various African indigenous music practices (particularly from South Africa), Western classical music (I played classical music on the violin from the age of five until I switched to become a self-taught pianist, improviser and composer at age sixteen), contemporary music and American jazz history all form part of the development I discuss.

In my description and reflection on the works of Ngqawana and Ibrahim, I deliberately avoid theoretical explanations. The sources I draw on include listening, reading interviews, and in the case of Ngqawana, actually working, touring, recording and studying with him. In these sources and in my interactions with these musicians, I have found that they describe their work in philosophical rather than theoretical terms. It's important to note that this is a highly individualistic, organic philosophy (it is not the canonical, mostly Western philosophy that is taught at universities). They draw on personal experience and practical engagement with other artists (in person or on record) to articulate their musical approaches. It is this autodidactic element that is very important and highly prized in the kind of jazz practice they represent. It is not the kind of jazz practice taught at formal jazz schools or institutions, but a practice that embraces

¹ "Come from" is jazz jargon denoting the dynamics of lineage: it refers to a musician who studied the music of, or personally studied with and is influenced by another musician. It is very seldom that this is done at an institution, it rather happens informally through listening to records or interacting with more established musicians. In this sense, "come from" is short for "coming from the school of".

a spirit of experimentation and a quest for individuality that holds authenticity and originality as its ideals.

By authenticity, I do not mean a fixed idea of “how things should be performed” as, for instance, in historically informed performance practice, in which this notion of authenticity arises in the sense of recapturing a certain sound and conventions of playing (Cook, 1998: 95-96). It is also not related to the debates in jazz discourse on whether jazz might be considered most “authentically” an African American art form, and jazz practices by others (e.g. white Americans) or elsewhere (for instance Japan and Europe) are therefore cast as derivative (Atkins, 2001: 19-20). Rather, by “authenticity” I mean being true to one’s own personality, spirit or character as opposed to imitating others. This is an aspirational and a continuous process of development that involves situating oneself in terms of your own particular context (e.g. location) or set of musical influences (within the lineage of Ibrahim and Ngqawana, in this case), and forging one’s own musical approach by drawing on and finally going beyond these influences. As no other musician works from the same personal coordinates, “authenticity” in this sense speaks to a deeply personal and original music practice. This is one sense of “the own” I invoke in the thesis title: tracing the constant process of finding one’s voice; becoming and searching for the self in/through an artistic practice.

Authenticity as an aspiration is a recurring theme in conversations in the community of musicians within which I work and with whom I identify.

The task (or challenge) in writing this thesis, then, is to find ways to engage with this approach to musical thought and practices. The mode through which this could be done is not a theoretical mode of engagement, but one that is rooted in practice.

This leads me to the methodologies I employ in this study: auto-ethnography and practice-based research (or artistic research), as indicated in the dissertation’s title and described more fully below. An account of Ibrahim and Ngqawana’s practices is marshalled to witness the process of artistic development through practice and experience the artist him/herself seeks out, rather than a teaching methodology. It takes

account of this fashioning of an own learning experience and mode of articulation; an experimental process that is highly reflexive, as it takes as its goal or ideal the honing of an individual voice.

As a musician and composer myself, I know that for many jazz musicians, once the task of achieving competence on an instrument is achieved, the focus often shifts to the philosophy that makes sense of and shapes the artistic output. Many jazz musicians, particularly those who compose, are constant auto-ethnographers. An album, for example, is a document of a period of one's development and a materialization of one's philosophies, politics and ideas. Without necessarily documenting it in text form, a jazz musician gives to the listener a personal account of their intellectual and musical development. While some might argue that the work should only be considered on its aesthetic level, I have found that song titles, liner notes and interviews – these personal accounts of the artistic journey – to be valuable when researching an artist, and it becomes especially so when one is interested in process rather than outcome.

The relative paucity of the academic literature on South African jazz, and – perhaps even more significantly – the fact that jazz knowledge is by and large shaped outside of the academy (rather than within), has several consequences for the sources that inform this thesis. For one, knowledge produced outside of the academy and its usual organs (such as scholarly journals and academic books) means that the sources I consult to inform my study are necessarily less academic texts that include, for instance, blogs, websites, jazz magazines or liner notes. For another, it also means taking seriously other modes of knowledge dissemination – that is, non-textual sources such as multi-media platforms such as YouTube – closely watching performances and listening to interviews or instances where artists simply speak about their work. These sources are publically accessible either for the artists' own use and dissemination of their views and their music, or for viewers or listeners to access relatively freely and easily.

I am in the fortunate position to draw on my own experiences, conversations and direct interactions with the musicians discussed in this thesis. These informal interactions that

predate this study were supplemented with more targeted interviews for the purposes of this thesis. Given the nature of this thesis as well as its intellectual project to explore knowledge in what musicians do and say, it was particularly important that I take into account what the musicians said about their processes themselves and not what was written about their work as a secondary account or analysis of their performances.

Methodology: Practice-based research and auto-ethnography

From the outset, this thesis was conceived as practise-based research (PBR). Perhaps the essence of PBR is that performance becomes research, and performance is therefore not the end (result) of the process but rather part of a greater whole. Borgdorff distinguishes between the following relationships between research and the arts:

Research *on* the arts - denotes research that has art as its object, and is common to disciplines such as musicology, social sciences, art history, media studies and theatre studies (Borgdorff 2007, 5).

Research *for* the arts - Indicates art as the objective rather than the object: it implies research that provides insight into concrete practices, and is described as the “instrumental perspective” (Ibid.).

Research *through* art - This characterizes practice as the essential component of both the research process and its result (Borgdorff quoted in Stolp 2012, 81; also compare Peter Dallow 2003, 51 for a similar understanding).

It is this last relationship, research *through* art, that practice-based research is concerned with. There are different terminologies for this mode of research, including practice-led research, practice as research and practice-based research (Stolp 2012, 79). Practise-based research is most widely used and understood as a blanket term.

Importantly, and more specific to the practise of music performance, Stolp (2012, 80) writes that “[i]n PBR projects, the practitioner approaches performance as the locus of new knowledge, from whence specific insights into a particular research problem can be

gleaned. The performer engaged with PBR further sees performance as knowledge-generative, and seeks to articulate the knowledge embodied in performance”. If performance is the catalyst for new knowledge creation then, upon reflection of my own practice as a jazz musician, it is clear that musicians in this genre are always experimenting and searching for ways in which to generate new knowledge (researching new sounds to incorporate, new approaches to melody, rhythm and harmony) and using assimilated bits of influences they sought out and accumulated. In many ways it is a type of research through constant experimentation. Jazz music has always entailed this approach, precisely because of the importance of the tradition of transmission and the emphasis on practice as the field where knowledge is communicated, retained and broadened. Because practice, rather than text-based transmission of knowledge, predominates, jazz provides an exceptionally appropriate discursive field for PBR.

Experimentation in jazz happens collectively in a band setting, on the bandstand while performing, in the rehearsal space and within each musician’s individual practise. Be-bop is an ideal example of, as Stolp (2012, 80) puts it, “knowledge-generative” performance practice. While the be-bop movement has its influences, the sound was created “from the ground up” by its practitioners (Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk to name a few) at jam sessions in various jazz clubs in New York. As Dallow (2003, 54) observes, “[i]n practice-based research, investigation through practice is the methodology”. This definition captures PBR as it applies to jazz where the epistemology has always been to discover by playing, by the act of engaging with the music, night after night, unceasingly. As Stolp (2012, 80) further elucidates the dynamic between practice, knowledge generation and experience:

The knowledge that PBR engages is generated by practice, and is to some extent embodied in the creative outcome of the work. In this sense, knowledge generated through PBR can be said to be both perceptual and conceptual: in music, the initial research questions or problems are suggested through the subjective experiences of the performer while engaged with practice, and followed up in a reflexive and methodical manner.

An argument against PBR may be that some music is made for “purely” musical and aesthetic reasons and not to lead to research. I concede that this may be true. However, where an artist is engaged with a deliberately experimental music practice and sets out to discover something new through composition and performance, PBR articulates a knowledge generation process whether or not this knowledge finds expression in written academic reflection. I agree with Borgdorff (2011, 44) when he writes that “[a]rtistic research [...] unites the artistic and the academic in an enterprise that impacts both domains”. There is an advantage to be gained for any performer by reflecting and documenting their development. In my experience, the entire process of being a jazz musician and composer is a practice-based research exercise that mostly unfolds without its intellectual or artistic gains being documented. It entails constant reflection on development, influence and accumulation. For example, I determine my own development path by carefully choosing the music and musicians that I study, for those will ultimately shape my work. This idea is echoed by Berliner (1994, 138):

... many youngsters redefine their early artistic goals to include an amalgam of the features of their favourite improvisers within their instrument’s lineage ... this approach enables students to move in the direction of forging personal styles, while at the same time operating confidently within the bounds of the jazz tradition.

The difficulty for any jazz researcher and/or developing jazz musician, including the difficulty I found in writing this dissertation, is that there is no blueprint or template pertaining to particular creative processes or their particular development. The word “particular” in this case is synonymic to “individual”, in that each individual’s path is unique. Especially in jazz, the subjective nature of artistry is amplified by the very nature of the music to explore the unknown with the known as a point of departure, i.e. improvising within either a set of preconceived ideas or improvising from a completely blank state. In this thesis I explore my interest in Ibrahim with regard to the influences that constitute his development, his individual approach to concertizing and the elements

that constitute his sound. In the case of Ngqawana, I relate how my perception of and participation in his work has influenced what I started to do as a musician and am still engaged with today. The choice of these musicians, a creative and intuitive choice, can also be read as a kind of improvisatory process.

I found the task of documenting the artistic process very difficult. I found it most beneficial to relate statements and assertions back to my own practice and the time I spent with the musicians I focus on. To this end, auto-ethnography provided a way of writing about artistic process. “As a method, auto-ethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography” (Ellis, Adams, Bochner 2011, 275). Auto-ethnography as “a form of writing” (Denshire 2014, 831) offers a way of both documenting and analyzing personal experience.

The criticism that auto-ethnography transgresses the boundaries between the personal and the professional (Denshire, 2014, 831) could well be its strength when looked at within the context of music (particularly jazz), improvisation and composition. As Denshire (2014, 831) writes, “auto-ethnographers will often blur boundaries, crafting fictions and other ways of being true in the interests of rewriting selves in the social world”. In the context of the jazz artist, it is the self that we want to hear when listening to a musician we call an “artist”. Becoming “personal’ is essential to be “professional” or, put the other way round, becoming “professional” means honing a more clearly delineated and recognizable “personal” that is projected through the music. This is a notion of “authenticity” that is a requirement for the artist in jazz: adding himself to his sound and music.

Although “writing both selves and others into a larger story goes against the grain of much academic discourse” (Denshire, 2014: 832), the opposite argument could be made for this in the context of the creative arts and the subjective nature of creativity, composition and improvisation. As mentioned in this thesis, an important element in the analysis of an artist is to address process, particularly thought processes, and the non-musical elements that inspire and inform the music. Auto-ethnography is suited to this

type of pursuit, as it allows the artist to document the process of creating work in a reflective and analytical manner that does not disqualify the subject from being central to what is thought and documented. As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, 273) write, “auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience”. Lydia Turner (quoted in Denshire, 2011: 834) makes a further case for the positives of auto-ethnographic study: “auto-ethnography suggest alternatives [to dominant narratives] and proffer viewpoints previously discarded as unhelpfully subjective”.

It may be due to my non-academic background, but I feel it is important for a practice-based study to be written by a practitioner or someone who has worked musically with other practitioners – voices often absent from the dominant academic narrative – and to document their thoughts and processes and show an insider perspective from a creative point of view. In my case, I have worked frequently with musicians like Zim Ngqawana, Carlo Mombelli, Louis Moholo, Robbie Jansen, Lionel Loueke and many others. One can only wonder what knowledge we may have gained if people like Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane endeavoured to write deliberately to document their processes, which could then be read along with their rich library of scores and recordings. The main vehicle for this kind of reflective writing has been the (auto)biography, in which it is not the particular goal to carefully describe and document artistic process. As an experienced performer who has been inducted into the knowledge of the practices central to my art by individual artists, it has always been important to me to pay careful attention to the person behind the creation, as well as to the theoretical analysis of the work. My decision to position my own practice and subjectivity as central to this thesis, is a recognition of how immeasurably poorer we are in South Africa because musicians such as Winston Mankunku, Robbie Jansen and Basil Coetzee did not do this, or were not offered the opportunity to do so.

Many more practice-based studies need to be conducted on South African jazz and its musicians. In a country where the epistemological approach to jazz practice is so often only informal and oral-based, an in-depth interrogation into the works and processes of

our artists is urgent. Documenting and growing the jazz archive become more important as the knowledge carried by an older generation slowly disappears. The only way to propagate the continual development of South African jazz, and to invigorate that development, is for young musicians in music schools and tertiary institutions to have sufficient materials, written by or on elder musicians, to use as the scaffolding of their own burgeoning authenticity.

Chapter outline

In Chapter 1 I discuss the biographies of Abdullah Ibrahim and Zim Ngqawana and how their approaches to their work have influenced my practise. In the case of Ibrahim, I reflect on the influence of his music on my own practise through my thorough study and reflection of his many interviews and years of listening to both his live performances and recordings. In the case of Ngqawana, my reflection is largely based on my interaction with him as a student at his *Zimology Institute*, as well as on our subsequent collaborations. An enduring theme in these discussions is the consideration and discussion of Ibrahim and Ngqawana's personal musical and life philosophies and how these pertain to their practise as composers, improvisers, performers and educators.

Chapter 2 proceeds to focus on my own practise, as it follows on from my study of and assimilation and implementation of the knowledge gained from studying Ibrahim and Ngqawana. In this chapter I detail the mechanics of my own approach and its development from my early years as a student to the current time, after over a decade of practise. I also discuss my ideas on my performance practise, my approach to band leading, composing, improvising and writing and producing music for film.

In Chapter 3 I reflect on the performance portfolio component of this thesis. I give descriptions of the most notable aspects of certain compositions. My hope is that the ideas expressed in the previous two chapters will be easily discernible in the attached performances. The repertoire I have selected for these performances coincide with the ideas expressed in my thesis. The overarching theme, considering all the compositions

of the repertoire as one body, is my search to find a balance between my “roots” music as an African musician/composer, as well as a footing in the sounds and practises of modern jazz, contemporary electronica and new (classical) music.

Chapter 1

A Reflection on the Work of Abdullah Ibrahim and Zim Ngqawana

I have always had a particular interest in South African jazz composer-performers who have developed, to my ear, a unique voice on their instruments, in their compositions and their style of improvisation. I find the period in South African jazz post-1960 of particular interest, specifically the work of Abdullah Ibrahim (1934-) and Zim Ngqawana (1959-2011). This chapter is not a chronology or biography of these artists, but rather an exploration of their musical influences, approaches and sound palettes from the perspective of someone engaged in artistic practice. It is also not a disconnected, objective account, but a personal reflection that, because of my different connections with each artist, takes an inconsistent approach to the two musicians. I engage with Abdullah Ibrahim's work as someone who has studied his recordings and playing extensively, while my reflections on Zim Ngqawana's music practice stems from my interactions and collaborations with him. There is also notably less literature on Zim Ngqawana, in comparison to the number of studies, articles, and interviews on Abdullah Ibrahim. Unlike Ngqawana, therefore, Ibrahim could more easily be approached through literature.

I have had the opportunity to know both these musicians, and to hear them in concert as well as in more informal settings on many occasions. Zim Ngqawana and I performed and recorded together in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and toured in France. Our most frequent collaborations, however, were improvisation sessions at the Zimology Institute, where I was also a student of Ngqawana's. Our most notable collaboration is a duet performance of completely improvised music documented in Aryan Kaganof's film *The Exhibition of Vandalizim* (2010). In 2011, Ngqawana featured on "Slave Labour", a composition of my own for *xaru* (Khoi-San mouthbow), double bass, drum kit and tenor saxophone on my album *South African History X!*, released in 2012.

My connection to Ibrahim began when my mother, Michele Shepherd, played in a string quintet that toured Europe with Ibrahim in 1993. The group consisted of Samantha Walters (violin), Michele Shepherd (violin), Joshua Thelele (viola), Kutlwano Masote (cello) and Miranda Basset (cello), and played saxophonist Ricky Ford's arrangements of Ibrahim's works. Ford played tenor saxophone in Ibrahim's jazz septet, *Ekaya*, and featured on the group's albums *Ekaya* (1984), *No Fear, No Die* (1993),² *Water From an Ancient Well* (1986) and *Mindif* (1988)³ (Rasmussen, 2000). My mother later went on to teach at and run the administration of Ibrahim's music school, M7, in Cape Town. This was where, in the early 2000s, my contact with him and his music was established. It coincided with the early stages of my encounters with playing the piano, jazz, improvising and composing and it was Ibrahim's philosophy that became the most profound influence on the way I thought about music. The philosophical cornerstone of Ibrahim's school was centered on his idea of the synergy between all things, for example how the understanding of the body's vital energy in the practice of Chinese qi-gong relates to the South African bushman's concept of vital energy called "xum". The seven M's (from the school's name) represent music, meditation, movement, menu, medicine, martial arts and memory. Ibrahim spoke of how, if conducted in a holistic manner, the study of jazz in conjunction with the above mentioned disciplines could benefit the student.

The initial attraction to the work of these two individuals was at first a spiritual connection to their music and their personal philosophies, which in both cases are the driving forces behind the processes and outcomes of their work. For Ibrahim and Ngqawana, music serves as the medium in the quest for spiritual elevation, akin to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme"-period. As Ngqawana commented, "...it is not a sound for entertainment, it is a sound for inner attainment" (liner notes, *Live at the Bird's Eye*, 2007). In this regard, I am struck by how musicians (especially, though not exclusively,

² *No Fear, No Die* was originally made as the soundtrack to Claire Denis's film *S'en Fout la mort* (1990)

³ *Mindif* was originally made as the soundtrack to Claire Denis's film *Chocolat* (1988).

those who improvise) are able to immerse themselves in the moment as if engaged in a form of meditation. If one considers meditation as a process of achieving the “no mind” state, it is particularly suited to improvised performance where the emphasis, or ideal requirement, is for the musician not to recite practiced information, but rather to present an assimilation of a practice in spontaneous, free-flowing creation in the moment. Improvisation contains fragments of the past and the future in present tense, raw and in the moment. As Keith Jarrett (quoted in Dibb, 2005) said: “by virtue of the holistic quality of it [improvisation], it takes everything to do it. It takes real time, no editing possible. It takes your nervous system to be on alert for every possible thing in a way that cannot be said for any other kind of music.” Both Ibrahim and Ngqawana are at their most powerful when this “alertness for every possible thing” that characterizes improvisation as real-time performance and composition, is present.

As I spent time with these two musicians, I came to understand their philosophies as related to each another, and reflective of a particular holistic view of improvisation as an expression of all aspects of life. For both Ngqawana and Ibrahim, there is no separation between life on the one hand and music (improvisation) on the other, and therefore there is no distinction to be made between “on-stage” and “off-stage”. For both artists, the work is an embodiment of their lives and ideas, and is the result of an intentional development over the course of a career.

Later, as I paid attention to the aesthetic and technical aspects of their music in my listening, I experienced a profound connection not only to their playing, but also the social and historical context of each musician’s work. Being a young musician from Cape Town, I felt a particular resonance with the work of Ibrahim, who is also from this city. By contrast, my initial gravitational pull toward Ngqawana’s work was due to the freedom and “going beyond the boundary” he actively sought – an approach that continues to keep me engaged today. While Ibrahim represents a pillar of South African jazz and is a respected elder figure among South African jazz musicians, Ngqawana

represents the eternally searching African Renaissance man whose most valuable work came after 1994 and South Africa's apartheid period.

These two artists are, in my opinion, part of a lineage: Ngqawana comes from Ibrahim (who is one of his key influences) as a student of life and music. It is no coincidence, then, that I find so many parallels in their work. Ngqawana was part of Ibrahim's band in the 1990s and later became his student. In fact, as Ngqawana remarked to me while we were sitting in an airport coffee shop en route to Europe, he could easily have taken the decision to stay in Ibrahim's band for the rest of his career. Like many musicians in the jazz tradition, Ngqawana would not have found that type of "discipleship" odd. For example, many musicians stayed in Duke Ellington's band for their entire career and other such luminary band leaders and revolutionary thinkers such as Sun Ra also inspired members to exclusive devotion and communal living in his "Arkestra" (also see, for example, Berliner, 1994: 36-41).

In the next sections I discuss Ibrahim and Ngqawana individually, taking account of the elements that constitute their work, approaches to performance and composition, and their philosophies that place music within a more holistic context. This consideration reflects not only on the geographical origin of the music, but also the musical and non-musical inspiration for the work.

Abdullah Ibrahim

Accounts of Ibrahim's life and music are usually constructed around the big markers in his career: his early years in Cape Town, his years in exile and the meeting with Duke Ellington that effectively launched his international career, his conversion to Islam in 1968, his involvement in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the 1970s and '80s, and his

study of martial arts (see for instance the “Abdullah Ibrahim” entry in SA History Online; Chase 2010, 159; Jaggi 2001). While these are certainly significant aspects that shaped Ibrahim’s career and music practice, in this section I take a different approach. I deliberately steer clear of these biographical tropes that have sprung up around Ibrahim, tropes that tend to neglect a close listening to Ibrahim’s music, or otherwise condition such a listening to follow (or even support) this biographical reading in a self-validating exercise. Instead, I explore his sound and musical approaches more freely across the usual demarcations that condition the standard narrative. This enables me to place these musical influences and impulses within the extended trajectory of Ibrahim’s long career.

American and South African traces

Ibrahim started piano lessons at age seven (c. 1942) and performed in his first professional engagement around 1950 at Martin’s Bar in his home suburb of Kensington, Cape Town (Rasmussen, 2000: 9). Like most South African jazz musicians learning their craft in the 1950s, Abdullah Ibrahim was deeply influenced by American jazz. Among the numerous American jazz records that arrived in South Africa were albums by pianists and composers such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Thelonious Monk (Ballantine 2012, 18-30; Muller and Benjamin 2011, 63-4; Nixon 1994, 12-13). A telling example of Ibrahim’s close relationship with American recorded jazz is the story of how he became known by his nickname, “Dollar Brand”,⁴ as he was known before his conversion to Islam. In the South African jazz community, it is believed that Ibrahim was given the nickname “Dollar” because he always had dollars on him to buy jazz records from docked American sailors in Cape Town. My interpretation, however, is that the name “Dollar” derives from his Christian first name, Adolph.

⁴ His christened name was Adolph Johannes Brand.

Bebop, hard bop and post-bop influenced a handful of what were in my opinion the more “progressive” of South African jazz musicians of the 1950s and ’60s – figures like Ibrahim, Kippie Moeketsi, Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwangwa. The leading American jazz figures of these styles included pianist Thelonious Monk, drummer Kenny Clarke, alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and bassist Charles Mingus, among others, who played bebop (a characteristically fast, vigorous and a deliberately challenging jazz style). Christopher Ballantine (2012, 9) notes the two directions to which South African jazz ensembles of the time looked for their musical inspiration: “One direction – towards the United States – looked primarily to the virtuoso bebop style of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie; the other looked towards the fertile indigenous soil of *marabi*”. It is important to note that Ibrahim had one foot in each of these “camps”. While his early compositions and recordings display the influence of bebop, his later work incorporated indigenous South African music, most notably *marabi*.

Taking the longer view of Ibrahim’s career over several decades, the most discernable American jazz musicians who left a footprint in his work were:

- 1) Duke Ellington: Ibrahim has recorded many Ellington compositions like “Come Sunday”, “In a Sentimental Mood” and “Solitude” and has dedicated a number of original compositions to him, namely “Duke”, “Duke 88”, and “A Dukish Melody”. Ibrahim has also dedicated his album “Ode to Duke” to Ellington (Rasmussen, 2000: 165-179).
- 2) Thelonious Monk: Apart from Ellington and the music of Africa, South Africa, and Cape Town, Ibrahim’s other major influence is Thelonious Monk. He has dedicated a number of original compositions to Monk namely “For Monk”, “Monk in Harlem”, “A Monkish Tune” and has recorded many Monk compositions like “Coming on the Hudson”, “Crepuscule with Nellie”, “Evidence” and “Light Blue” (Rasmussen, 2000:165-179). In Ibrahim’s composition “Vary-Oo-Vum” on the Jazz Epistles’ *Verse 1*, Monk’s underpinning influence is already felt, particularly in terms of harmonic

structure. He employs Monk-style harmonic and rhythmic comping behind the solos of the horns, including Monk's jarred edges and playful rhythmic inventiveness.

3) Ornette Coleman: Ibrahim dedicated a composition "Ornette's Cornet" to Ornette Coleman, featured on his album *Underground in Africa*, where he was backed by the band Oswietie (Afrikaans slang for "We don't know"). Oswietie comprised of Robbie Jansen (alto saxophone), Basil "Manenberg" Coetzee (first tenor saxophone), Arthur Jacobs (second tenor saxophone), Lionel Beukes (Fender bass) and Nazier Kapdi (drums) (Brand, 1974).

4) John Coltrane: Ibrahim dedicated a number of compositions to Coltrane such as the "Coltrane Suite".

The first album Ibrahim recorded was with the group The Jazz Epistles, featuring Kippie Moeketsi (alto saxophone), Hugh Masekela (trumpet), Jonas Gwangwa (trombone), Dollar Brand (piano, later known as Abdullah Ibrahim), Johnny Gertze (double bass) and Makaya Ntshoko (drums). This album, titled *Verse I* (recorded on 22 January 1960 and released later the same year) features compositions and playing predominantly in the bebop and hard bop style (Mason 2007, 27). This is evident in melodic phrasing, quick chord changes and improvisational style. Significantly, *Verse I* was the first bebop album recorded in South Africa. The opening track on the album, "Dollar's Moods" (composed by Hugh Masekela), is a typical fast bebop melody over quick chord changes, and Dollar Brand's "Uku-Jonga Phambili" is stylistically akin to a Thelonious Monk composition in its chord progressions and angular melody.

Ibrahim's composition "Gafsa", also on this album, already contains the germ of a compositional approach he develops over the course of his career. This is an example of Ibrahim's compositions as sound portraits: music composed with a particular story as its backdrop, although this story is not overtly stated or narrated in the performance but rather remains as a subtext (also see Vos 2016, 195). Some of his most iconic later

compositions like “Mannenbergh”, “The Wedding”, “Thabo Bosigo – The Mountain” and “African Dawn” are examples of this. Indeed, storytelling is a way in which Ibrahim communicates about his approaches to his music, as we shall see later.

Ibrahim’s later sound palette increasingly draws on the cultural environment of his upbringing. As Ibrahim (quoted in Okuley, 1968) observes, “music at home is something you hear all day long, wherever you go. In the streets, at work, at home, on spiritual occasions – the sounds are all there – drums, choral singing, chants, carnival music, street songs, concerts and jazz sessions at clubs”. In an article he wrote for the *Cape Herald* newspaper in 1968, when he returned to South Africa the first time after five years spent in Europe and the United States, he describes Cape Town’s sounds as follows:

I hear the sound of the waves beating against the dock and Chris and Dicky singing with their friends in the flats in Eighth Avenue. I hear the South Easter blowing and rattling the zinc fence in our backyard. I hear the bass drum, flute and side-drum of the ‘Acha-Americans’ and Tommy and Jewell singing “It’s Doekum” and Fatima’s laughter and Dinah’s piano and Babs selling fruit from his push-cart and Judge and Bolly – guitars and alto – and Sunday church voices and preachers on street corners and bells (Ibrahim quoted in Vos, 2016: 171).

If this description conveys a vivid portrayal of the soundscape of Cape Town, the ambient sounds were not the only musical influences he encountered there. I also hear echoes of the lyricism and extended forms of Schubert piano sonatas in his composition “Ubu-Suku”, and Beethoven’s use of contrast and surprise in his composition “Jabulani-Easter Joy”. Although these influences do not exclusively “belong” or point to Cape Town, it nevertheless forms part of the musical world he was exposed to during his youth. Christine Lucia (2005, 55 and 57) writes that Ibrahim’s mother, a pianist herself and leader of the AME Church Choir, as well as his early piano lessons, introduced him to classical repertoire.

Over the course of Ibrahim's career an assimilation of all these influences occurred (most notably the influence of Ellington, Monk and South African endogenous music). In addition, an incipient minimalism and tendency toward the cyclical has always been present. For example, much like Arvo Pärt's piano composition "Für Anna Maria No.2", Ibrahim is content to play a repeated I-IV-V chord cycle, most certainly in a *marabi* style in his case, sometimes endlessly, where so many other pianists would opt for quaver, semiquaver or demi-semiquaver improvised phrases after four or eight chord cycles. Christopher Ballantine (2012, 6-7) defines *marabi* as "rhythmically propulsive dance music... [which] drew its melodic inspiration eclectically from a wide variety of sources, and it rested harmonically – as did the blues – upon an endlessly repeating chord cycle". Ibrahim displayed this ability patiently to allow cyclical passages to evolve in his performances from an early stage in his solo career. The compositions on his 1969 albums *African Sketchbook* and *African Piano* are, with the exception of those that are in a hymnal style (see, for instance, Lucia's analysis of "Mamma" in Lucia 2002), entirely cyclical in nature without many right hand melodic runs. This would continue to be a distinguishable element of Ibrahim's solo piano compositions and playing throughout his career.

Ibrahim's approach to the solo piano concert format

To me, Ibrahim is at his most compelling in his solo playing. Listening to an entire solo concert, the constituent individual compositions woven together in an intricate tapestry gives one the feeling of having experienced a vastly nuanced textural wave of sound. The format of Ibrahim's solo concerts is unique in the way that he plays non-stop for around an hour at a time (his concert usually consists of two sets of approximately one hour each), although he has remarked that "he wishes his concerts could be longer" (Okuley, 1968). When he arrived in Europa, Ibrahim (ibid.) recalls, he "realised that four or five hours of playing time was too long for European audiences." In his liner notes to his solo piano album *Senzo* (which follows this concert format even though it

was recorded in studio without an audience,) Ibrahim (2008) states that

This recording and live-concerts are based on the original concept of storytelling. Each song is an entity on its own which offers further expansion. In [African] tradition the story-trance-dance has no time constraint limits. “Come let us dance the night away, daybreak is only light years away.”

This statement makes it clear that Ibrahim considers his music and playing as connected to an African tradition of music. Whether it sounds overtly African or not, it is intended to function in society not as entertainment but as a phenomenon with much deeper ritualistic meaning. Ibrahim (2010) asserts that “in traditional [African] culture, music was an integral part of everyday life. It was not something that you went to”. Forty-two years earlier he similarly observed that “in Africa, music is spiritual and mysterious ... it is not something you buy a ticket to listen to but an integral part of society” (quoted in Okuley, 1968). Ngqawana (quoted in *All About Jazz*, 2002) reiterates this idea when he comments: “That’s why you have to see the whole thing in context: you have to see the drummers, the dancers, and the song. Then you understand that we’re dealing with totality”.

My interpretation of Ibrahim’s statements is that he adopts an influence from traditional African society in the format of his performances. Perhaps this is a homage to an idea of his “roots”: not directly the “roots” of his upbringing in urban Cape Town, but rather a construction of an African ideal or Africanism. As Christine Lucia argues about his output in the 1970s (1999: 53), “Ibrahim’s music began to ‘construct’ Africa, and images of African life, and themes of exile, longing and homecoming became the dominant themes in the titles of his tunes and albums”.

Bringing “home” into the music may also have been a means through which Ibrahim could distinguish himself in the world of musicians. This could also be understood as a means of resisting (or even subverting) orthodox western art music and jazz

concertizing, where format is adapted to package the concert for public consumption: two sets, not too long, with a break in-between to sell drinks, food and merchandise. Ibrahim chose a different approach. The long form of non-stop solo piano playing, in my opinion and experience, offers a way to connect to the music on a much deeper level than the conventional concert format allows. A significant difference to the function of the music occurs when improvisation is taken out of and freed from the conventional concert format and the aesthetic expectations of performing on stage.

This approach to performance is akin to the musician playing to himself in his practice studio, where time constraints, performance fees, demands from audiences, concert producers and travel time are not present. When these external factors are not a consideration for the musician, it creates the possibility to connect in a different way to the vision of the music. Other improvisers also observe the constraints a concert setting places on the improvisation. Consider, for instance, Keith Jarrett's comment on his atonal improvisations, which he calls "multi-tonal" explorations (2009):

I wish they could go on forever. No one will ever hear this in concert, because I would be asking so much from the audience. But in my studio, that happens for thirty minutes at a time, and maybe it could go on forever.

In this explorative, stream of consciousness approach to playing, Ibrahim's commitment to a highly individualized ideal of music and its performance, becomes apparent. The compositions and improvisations could be considered actualizations of the individual.

Choices in Piano Technique

In my experience, Ibrahim's solo format approach is akin to being taken on a narrative journey in a theatre or cinema. The listener is not merely experiencing a competent jazz pianist, but one dealing with what might be called "post-competent" ideas in his playing. Benjamin Givan (2009: 48) explains the notions of "pre-competent" and "post-

competent”, often used among musicians in jazz discourses, through the example of Thelonious Monk. Monk’s “mature pianism,” he argues, “rather than pre-competent, might be regarded as a calculated, ‘post-competent’ revision of standard practice.” He further explains that “according to accounts of his early years, Monk certainly could play in the conventional way”, and therefore argues that “the eclectic nature of his sound and technique were purely a matter of individual choice.” From this explanation it emerges that the word “pre-competent” refers to the process of becoming proficient in standard jazz conventions, while “post-competence” refers to the individualization of a musician’s sound and technique, which often pushes the boundaries of jazz conventions.

Ibrahim makes distinct choices with regard to his piano technique in order to achieve his individualistic sound. The post-competence of Ibrahim’s technical ability is evident in the independence of his left and right hand lines (deeply grooving ostinato left hand figures while freely improvising with the right hand), touch (tone and contrasting dark dissonances), pedaling and extended techniques such as making the piano sound like an *mbira* (prepared piano) and emulating African choirs (four-part harmony with chordal tremolos), all combining to form a deeply original piano sound (much like Monk’s technical choices constitute his).

Describing how he arrives at a particular tone and touch, Ibrahim (2016) remarks that “it comes through trial and error. What is the best method to transmit what you are really feeling?” Ibrahim avoids technical displays in favour of the message and narrative of the composition, which in turn is embedded in the overarching narrative of a collage of compositions in the non-stop, free-flowing set. “So it’s not really necessary to show off the technique. Although we think we are very prolific technicians...the principle is to make your intention so clear and so sincere, that striking that one note will say everything” (Ibrahim, 2010). Keith Jarrett (quoted in Iverson, 2009), similarly comments on the shift from technical display to a more conceptual approach when he reflects on the first time he heard Ahmed Jamal: “It changed everything about what I

thought could happen. Up to then it was a virtuosity thing: playing fast, or swinging (at least swinging was there). But then there was a spatial thing and not a need for constant playing”.

The artistic voice cannot be normatively defined or restricted to certain aspects of performance or music creation. Whether it displays virtuosity or not, whether it is against the grain of convention or with, the challenge in fashioning an artistic voice is to discover new possibilities in the music and to do so consistently and coherently. The most influential artists manage to achieve this. In contrast with what Derek Bailey (1993: 52-53) observes of certain jazz idioms’ “tendency to derivativeness and the prevalence of imitative playing in all idiomatic improvisation” and how it “seems to have produced in jazz a situation where increasingly the music became identified with the playing style of a handful of musicians”, Ibrahim developed an individual approach and sound by studying and implementing very uncommon elements in his music making.

In the foreground of Ibrahim’s approach to his music practice is the pursuit “always [to] be discovering something new” (quoted in Himes, 2015). “It’s beautiful and scary, not knowing what will happen next. We go into different places, then ask ourselves later, ‘Where were you, what was that?’” As musicians we spend much of our time cultivating the intellectual aspect of our music making. Ibrahim has shown a commitment to developing the intuitive and perceptive faculties as well, tools much needed in the exploratory invention of improvisation. Reflecting on the forty years he studied martial arts in Japan, Ibrahim (quoted in Ouellette, 2006) recalls that his teachers would say:

[...] if you think about doings things your creativity will be curtailed. The samurai loses his fear and becomes totally fearless. The same holds true for jazz. You can’t be afraid to make mistakes.

The striving towards an intuitive approach is something that Ibrahim also recognized in his early mentor, Duke Ellington:

Ellington reminded me of the wise old man in the village. You have to watch what you say, like Mandela. With Mandela you try not to say anything. And when you [inevitably] start saying it, you realise you put your foot in your mouth. And Ellington had almost like this seventh sense of understanding... Almost like foreseeing. And I think it's a quality we try to develop as jazz musicians. This anticipation not just in the music but in one's life. (quoted in Appelbaum, 2016)

My approach to studying Ibrahim and a reflection on Ibrahim's approach to jazz learning.

How are we to study a musician like Ibrahim, someone who approaches his playing and compositions in a way that negates conventional institutional thinking on jazz?

Commonly, learning jazz is done by transcribing solos from the recorded work of the jazz greats (Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, John Coltrane, etc.). But what is to be gained by transcribing a player who employs predominantly small melodic motifs, not many solos, rhythmic ostinato patterns and cyclical textures? For example, Ibrahim's composition "Machopi", heard on his 1968 album *African Sketchbook*, is a cyclical ostinato with an Islamic vocal chant above (See fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1: Excerpt from "Machopi" (transcribed by author).



The answer, in my opinion, is to add to the musical understanding an interrogation of what could be called “influences”, understood as that which is entangled in the music in ways that resist easy classification or notation. As Jason Moran says (2015) “[When] I was learning jazz in college, we would just talk about the music. But you wouldn’t talk about the people and the issues they would have to deal with to make the music they made. And as I got older I began to fixate on that. Well, what’s the setup for this? How and why?” What Moran highlights is the interest in the musical process – the nuts and bolts of the music – that becomes of particular interest when one develops one’s own sound. Ibrahim’s views on the learning process in jazz are particularly interesting when compared to the conventions of western art music study. His comments on this process suggest that it is a community-orientated learning experience, where music is passed on in a manner not limited to music itself.

As a saxophonist (quoted in Berliner, 1994: 41) says of his apprenticeship with an elder saxophonist: “More than anything specific, it was a matter of Jackie Mclean being a model for me”; “It had to do with his personality too... Just to have a word from him was enough to send me home to practice for hours”. Ibrahim observes about jazz learning processes that “things are normally passed on as anecdotes, in the vein of passed-on stories of the great masters. For example, someone asked Ellington, ‘Duke, how do you manage to keep all these great musicians playing in your band for such a long time?’ And Duke said, ‘I’ve found a gimmick. I give them money!’ The fact that these anecdotes function on a mundane level too, speaks to the importance of a context of interpersonal relations that sustains the music.

In addition to what is described by Ibrahim, an important aspect of jazz epistemology is the common practice of informal apprenticeships with older, more experienced musicians, as well as knowledge sharing among one’s contemporaries. As Berliner (1994, 39) writes: “In addition to exchanging knowledge among peers, many young artists also develop apprenticeships with jazz veterans”. He goes on to say (1994, 41)

that “learners grappling with the hardships of mastering jazz often derive as much inspiration from their personal interaction with idols as from the information they acquire”.

My personal study of Ibrahim’s work extended to addressing Sufism (the mystical branch of Islam), the philosophy of martial arts, Cape Town’s history and culture, the history of the Afrikaans language, South Africa’s political history and the ritualistic function of music in the traditional cultures of Africa. This has made me a more holistically rounded musician. All of these influences come together and form the foundation for the expansion of musical themes that, as shown in Fig. 1.1, are created by Ibrahim in his performances. The musical content in this example may be sparse, but the performance is nonetheless powerful. It is a full embodiment, in real time, of a seeker’s life.

Zim Ngqawana

In this section I will discuss the music of Zim Ngqawana and my informal tuition at his “Zimology Institute” between 2007 and 2008. This period of study was significant in that the approach taken was completely new to me at the time, and refreshingly so. I found the freedom that Ngqawana encouraged us to find in the music to be incredibly liberating. As a young musician at the time, I had some ideas about the type of music I was searching for within myself and a teacher like Ngqawana was someone who encouraged original thinking and approaches to playing. The constant encouragement of the searching spirit in music is something still present in my approach to music making today. This is the most valuable musical and life lesson I learned at the Institute.

I first encountered Ngqawana at a concert he played with his quartet at the Grahamstown Jazz Festival in 2005. The quartet featured Herbie Tsoaeli (double bass),

Andile Yenana (piano), Kevin Gibson (drums) and Ngqawana (saxophone, flute, voice). That evening they played a dynamic set of reimagined versions of Ngqawana's compositions from his *Zimology*, *Vadzimu* and *Zimphonic Suites* albums as well as sections of free improvisation. It was Ngqawana's harmonically free playing, his unconventional use of form and instrumentation that had the most profound impact on me.

He opened the concert playing a large gong while the drummer played timpani in free time. Ngqawana then read an extract of the Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan's *The Mysticism of Sound and Music* (1996) and brought the band in while he read. The quartet also played Ngqawana's arrangements of some traditional Xhosa songs, to the delight of the audience. This is an aspect I most admired about Ngqawana: his music demanded that very searching spirit from his fellow players that I would later learn at the Zimology Institute, while always coming back to a familiar more traditional place giving every performance a sense of rootedness. He would navigate his way from an improvisation where he would read an extract of a book, to a modal ballad and then to singing a traditional Xhosa song. I left this concert feeling inspired.

It was around this time that I was also immersing myself in the music and philosophies of Ibrahim at his M7 School. A few years later, in 2007, I decided that I wanted to learn from Ngqawana and I went to Johannesburg from Cape Town to seek him out. I was so intrigued by his work that I felt compelled to get closer to what Ngqawana was producing musically and to gain a deeper understanding of his philosophy. I ended up living on his farm that housed the Institute in the south of Johannesburg, where I took up my apprenticeship.

There were only a handful of students at the Institute and our days were spent composing privately and playing free improvisations in ensemble format. It was here

that everything I thought about music was affirmed and validated. It was a place to cultivate a spirit of searching in our music making. At the time I had mistakenly thought that what Ngqawana was saying was that we were to limit ourselves to playing free jazz. I later realized that, in fact, this freedom we were practising daily was the freedom to 1) take the time to discover, 2) to be ourselves in the music, and 3) continually to develop that found personality, acknowledging it for whatever it may be.

Genre or style was not considered important at all. Ngqawana encouraged each of us towards a concept of a personally developed life philosophy – a path to discovering, developing and celebrating oneself as a musician. In fact, “Zimology” was Ngqawana’s own personal method of self-discovery, and at the heart of the teaching was the idea that we were to develop our own personal “-ology” throughout our lives. This was in strong contrast to the “formal” tuition I received at a tertiary institution in Cape Town, which I left after a year. The emphasis at this institution was on learning jazz in the traditional sense and spending much time addressing the jazz standard repertoire. While I do not dismiss that approach to learning jazz, it was not a method that was conducive to the type of unbounded creative endeavours that interested me, which at times borders on performance art.

At university I formed one of my first groups, called the FineART Quartet. I was exploring a performance idea that involved reciting the poetry I was writing along with my compositions, and long exploratory sections of improvisation. My choice to leave the institutional space of jazz learning does not reflect a disregard for the method of studying others as a necessary preparation for one’s early development, something I did with great dedication. It was rather an intuitive understanding that there had to be an alternative to the model of learning standard modes of improvisation and the standard jazz repertoire. In short, I wanted to study the music of my country and the musicians that made it.

Ngqawana's work, to me, represents freedom – freedom *from* conventions and freedom *to* discover oneself in the music. In a very holistic way, the music was a catalyst for me to learn about myself. The importance of this approach could not be overstated, considering that I was a nineteen-year-old not quite sure which direction to take in music, but with a few ideas that I insecurely sought to cultivate into something artistic. At the time when I arrived at the Zimology Institute, I concentrated my listening heavily on the music of Abdullah Ibrahim, Robbie Jansen, Jason Moran, Cecil Taylor and Ngqawana himself, who are all diverse in their approach to music and who have forged a personal style of composing and playing over the course of their careers. Upon hearing me play, Ngqawana immediately picked up who my influences were, which gave us a musical point of departure. I had never received such careful instruction before, despite my classical musical training on the violin for over ten years.

The Berklee Global Jazz Institute's Masters program, headed by Panamanian pianist Danilo Pérez, has successfully implemented an approach very similar to that of Ngqawana's teaching where the focus is on mentorship and student learning is the responsibility of active, professional musicians. A recent graduate from the Berklee program, Kesivan Naidoo (2017), commented: "I think in a nutshell the Global Jazz Masters Program's main focus was a holistic approach to learning. The course work included Business, Recording, History and Pedagogy... Then we got the masters [to] come in once a week. These were from around Danilo's reach of people: Terri Lynn Carrington, Brian Blade, John Patitucci, Joe Lovano and many others. The Guest Lecturer stays for three days at a time and some of them choose a special band to take to a gig and play. The experience being called by these artists and getting a real working experience is completely beyond theory, it becomes real – a direct link so to speak from the class room to the scene!"

Although I never sat down with Ngqawana and discussed any theoretical aspects of music, the benefit of studying with him was that I built up an ideological resolve (musically) which validated and strengthened the direction of my artistic commitment.

In my opinion, this is an aspect often overlooked in the development of an artist. Once the skill of competence is acquired, the questions then become “What am I playing or composing about?”, “What am I searching for in the music?” and “What direction do I want to take in music?” Perhaps going on this journey of discovery and acceptance early on in a career can eliminate years of artistic indecision. This was the case for me.

Ngqawana’s teaching approach also challenged the authoritarian role of the teacher in the conventional model of music education. He referred to us, his students, as “fellow travellers” (quoted in Mabandu, 2010). I found this attitude in his teaching to be particularly beneficial in our daily improvisation sessions. This flattening, or even inversion, of the teacher-student hierarchy is similar to that of the great jazz player and educator, Barry Harris (quoted in Berliner, 1994: 41), who often insists to students that he is “the oldest member of the class” and finds delight in saying: “I try to steal as much as I can from my students. After I steal enough, I will refuse to be the teacher any longer” (ibid). “With respect to the technical aspects of jazz, mentors typically create a congenial atmosphere for learning by conveying the view that student and teacher alike are involved in an ongoing process of artistic development and that the exchange of knowledge is a mutual affair” (Berliner, 1994: 41). Vijay Iyer (2014) places the apprenticeship mode of learning into a practical perspective:

Both you [referring to interviewer Jason Moran] and I have benefitted from apprenticeship. Where it’s not about what musicians think. Who cares what other musicians think. It’s actually about how the ideas work in reality. You know, in the context of an audience where you’re trying to communicate something. And that’s where you really learn. That’s where I’ve learnt the most from playing with elders like Roscoe (Mitchell), Amiri Baraka, Steve Coleman, Butch Morris, Wadada Leo Smith... It’s about how to really respond to the moment. Respond to even moments of what feels like failure, in the sense of when the music “breaks”, how do you fix it? In real time, really in the moment, you don’t have a

choice, you can't just start over, you actually have to pick it up and keep going. Those kinds of choices, observing elders in that kind of context where they teach you how to pick up the pieces or how to deal with what is in hand and make something out of it. That's where the ideas have the most impact, in that context.

This learning process was one of learning by doing – a practice-based study at its core. It was accelerated by being in a group setting with an elder musician, in this case Ngqawana, functioning as a “quiet” overseer rather than a controlling authority. To search and discover in the music was the only goal. As Ngqawana once remarked to me, “here, we can only accept future leaders who are willing to play wrong”. I reflected on this remark for some time, and came to the conclusion that being “willing to play wrong” means willingly to challenge the norms and actively attempt to break into the unknown, at the risk of sounding wrong. Commenting on the unpredictable and precarious nature of improvisation, Rzewski (1999, 384) argues that “[a]n improvisation must include the unedited raw material of ordinary life, in which chains of causality may appear for a time, but inevitably disappear. These moments in which causality disappears are things that can be simulated in written music, but never exactly duplicated”.

Speaking about the type of musician needed to work within his sound world, Johannesburg-based composer and bassist Carlo Mombelli (Mombelli 2007, 43) writes:

Besides the technical and stylistic challenge of my work, then, musicians have to be unusual improvisers: creative improvisers, with a voice of their own: improvisers who play “on the edge of wrong”.

I have played and toured with Mombelli on many occasions as a member of his Stories Quartet, and have also recorded on his latest album *I press my spine to the ground* (2016). I firmly believe that I got the job occupying the piano seat in his band, and have managed to keep it, because of these concepts I learnt at the Zimology Institute. In

addition, for a few years now I have played duo concerts with the legendary drummer Louis Moholo-Moholo. Any seat in any one of Moholo's groups are highly valued in South Africa and abroad, as he is one of the seminal free jazz figures in the world, having worked and continuing to work with some of the biggest names of the genre such as Wadada Leo Smith, Steve Lacy, Cecil Taylor, Irene Schweizer, Evan Parker, Jason Yard, Barr Phillips and Alexander Hawkins. Moholo, along with Dudu Pukwana, Chris McGregor and Johnny Dyani, was part of a group of musicians that went into exile, and who were seminal (and pioneering) in introducing free jazz in Britain. Consequently, these are the musicians Ngqawana cites as his musical influences. I believe the lineage of mentorship has come full circle in my musical relationship with Ngqawana, Mombelli and Moholo.

Ngqawana once said to me: "Robbie (Jansen) and Abdullah (Ibrahim) are your pillars but Dudu (Pukwana) and Johnny (Dyani) are mine". Jansen and Ibrahim, like myself, are from Cape Town while Pukwana and Ngqawana are from Port Elizabeth and Dyani from East London (both cities are in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa). I assume Ngqawana was referring to the pillars of our musical development and the idea of the music, and that his remark reflected the conviction that the musicians of one's immediate environment are an integral part of the foundation of any musician's development (an idea that I will discuss further in Chapter 2). It is instructive to consider the "pillars" he claimed when reflecting about Ngqawana's musical preferences. These could also include musicians with whom he studied later, such as Max Roach and Yusef Lateef in the United States.

There is, from early on in his development, a strong "leftist", "avant gardist" and "experimental" element and spirit to Ngqawana's work. That said, it always struck me how Ngqawana, intrinsically an avant-gardist, managed to appeal to so many people in South Africa. For example, his album *Zimology* sold nearly 100 000 copies, a significant number for a jazz album and certainly for an album in South Africa. This popularity could be attributed to Ngqawana's frequent use of traditional Xhosa, Zulu and *marabi*

elements in his works and his ability seamlessly to fuse this with his underpinning free jazz expression. Surrounding the dense textures of his improvisations, there were always memorable melodic motifs. As Hareuveni (2005) notes:

Ngqawana's music is deeply rooted in the folk-based traditions of South Africa, very warm, powerful, and passionate, leaving a lot of room for improvisation. His compositions are built on melodic motifs, and like Coltrane, his improvisations, inside and out, add layer upon layer on these motifs.

What is important to note from Hareuveni's quote is that he mentions the "inside and out"⁵ element of Ngqawana's playing. This idea references the polarity of approach between his early and later works. Commenting on his first ten albums, Ngqawana (quoted in Mabandu, 2010) remarks: "that was the music of a specific culture, people and time". Elsewhere, he elaborates on the concepts that interested him during his early period (Ngqawana, 2002):

If you look at the title on the *Zimphonic Suites* called "Ingoma Ya Kwantu" ...it means: the music of the continent. But again that goes beyond the issue of the language. We emphasize the language. Kwantu comes from Ubuntu ("humanity"), you know. Umtu means "creation". We are trying to bring back that concept.

Ngqawana's later works contrasted with his earlier music. Reflecting on what was to be his last phase of musical development, he observed that "the new music tries to transcend that [the traditional element of his earlier works]" (2010). He called this new approach "universal consciousness" and it aspired to a pureness of sound, "free from race, class and the specificity of history" (ibid). An example of this is heard on Ngqawana's last record, which is an as yet unreleased live recording of the New York-based Zim Ngqawana Collective Quartet (featuring Matthew Shipp on piano, William Parker on double bass and Nasheet Waits on drums). I would describe this recording as

⁵ In jazz jargon "inside" refers to tonal playing while "out" refers to atonal and a-rhythmic texture-based approaches to the playing of melodies, general song structure and most notably improvised solos.

searching and free while being rooted in neo-traditionalism. Although the concert consists completely of group improvisation, Ngqawana's use of (besides his saxophones and flutes) the kalimba, vocal chants and the type of melodic motifs that characterize his earlier works, grounds the performance simultaneously in tradition and exploratory sound that transcends tradition.

Perhaps the best way to describe Ngqawana's music and playing is as universal music that constitutes a deliberate refusal of any boundaries or categories. Besides the pervasive influence of American jazz and traditional African music in his work, he also draws from sources such as sufi chants (as heard on the Collective Quartet recording), far eastern flute music (as heard on his composition "Resolution") and among many others, Latin American music (as heard in his composition "Mozambique"). Despite an audible variety of influences, Ngqawana resists categorical descriptions of his music: "It's not a question of Africa or America" he says. "The American masters belong to my people. Duke Ellington is my father. John Coltrane is my father. I have to connect with all the people in the Diaspora who do the same thing as me, who practice the same form of expression, based on the same social conditions. I don't want to discriminate, or limit myself to South Africa. The world is not South Africa" (quoted in Kaganof, 2009).

From my perspective, first as a listener of Ngqawana's early work and later as a collaborator in his mature period, it is clear that this development was natural in the sense that he always spoke about, and in a sense played "where the music was going" and not exactly "where it was". Put another way, I was always under the impression that at no stage of his career, did Ngqawana's music feel stagnant, nor limited to a particular style or form. As Ngqawana's understanding and concept of himself developed, so did his music. As he transcended certain societal practices, so did his music. As time passed he sought to live in a freer way, to determine his own path in life and work, free from the parameters of ordinary life.

I experienced an example of this highly individualistic thought in my collaboration with Ngqawana when the Zimology Institute was burgled and vandalized, which was to be its ultimate demise. Ngqawana called me and asked if 1) I would be willing to perform a concert in the vandalized space and 2) if I was willing to play a broken grand piano (the pianos were thrown over and stripped of their brass components in the burglary). I answered yes to both questions and we went on to perform and record a video in the space which was to become Aryan Kaganof's film *The Exhibition of Vandalizim*. This incident and performance affected me profoundly. The Zimology Institute was a realization of a lifelong dream and to see it so badly vandalized was visibly soul-destroying to Ngqawana. That he decided to make art was the only way to heal himself and those of us who shared his love of the place and his hurt were witnesses to his commitment to the music and creativity. In the most dire circumstances, he demonstrated words he had said many years before: "Jazz for me is the most contemporary music that addresses the issues of the present day" (Ngqawana, 2002). The film that was produced documents a work of performance art. We played anything we could find in the building: broken instruments, bits of broken concrete, light fixtures, kitchen fixtures and our instruments. Ngqawana also speaks in the film, reflecting on the problem of crime in South Africa, demonstrating his holistic view of music that is not separate from its broader personal and social contexts.

The format of Ngqawana's performances are akin to Ibrahim's, in that he would also play a non-stop set of music with each composition flowing into the next, often with an improvised bridge to connect them. He used very obscure instruments in interesting ways, particularly in those improvised bridges, to introduce the next piece. Besides the alto, tenor and soprano saxophones, Ngqawana would frequently play whistles, bamboo flutes, piccolo, kalimba and the piano in his sets. In addition, Ngqawana often used his voice to sing in his vernacular language, Xhosa. I have always found it interesting to listen to non-pianists performing on the instrument. Any pianist knows that overcoming the trappings of the pianistic tendencies stored in one's muscle memory is a problem. And like bassist Charles Mingus and drummer Jack DeJohnette, Ngqawana plays piano

with a sound that could only come from a non-pianist. The imprecision of the playing is part of its charm. Where a pianist would play with harmonic and melodic clarity, Ngqawana plays with a kind of smudging between melody and harmony that invokes an image of an avant garde painter waving his paint brush across the canvas in an uncontrolled burst of energy. Even though I am a pianist, I find the non-pianistic nature of Ngqawana's piano playing compelling, much like Mingus, DeJohnette and visual artist and multi-instrumental musician Garth Erasmus (who recorded a full album of piano improvisations).

This is another way in which Ngqawana has influenced me as a pianist. The conventions of piano technique and the habitual nature of muscle memory on any instrument can be confining parameters from which it is difficult to escape as a player and composer, especially when composing at the instrument or with the instrument in mind. Two examples of Ngqawana's piano playing on record are on his 2001 album *Zimphonic Suites* on "Ode to Princess Magogo" and "Compassion". Both of these Ngqawana compositions are solo piano ballads. "Compassion" is harmonically influenced by Ibrahim's style in his compositions such as the "The Mountain". Ngqawana echoes Ibrahim's "The Mountain" in the first two chords of "Compassion" (see fig. 1.2). Both pieces begin with a Gb Major 7th chord followed by a Db/F chord, with Ngqawana using Ibrahim's exact chord voicing (see fig. 1.3) with the only variation being that Ngqawana plays a Gb minor add 6 chord to precede the Db/F chord.

Fig. 1.2: Excerpt from Ngqawana's "Compassion" (transcribed by author).

Compassion - Zim Ngqawana

The musical score for "Compassion" by Zim Ngqawana is presented in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature is G-flat major (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first measure begins with a G-flat major 7th chord (Gb maj 7) in the right hand, with a melodic line of G-flat, A-flat, B-flat, and C. The left hand plays a bass line of G-flat, B-flat, and D-flat. The second measure features a G-flat minor 7th add 6 chord (Gb min 7 add 6) in the right hand, with a bass line of G-flat, B-flat, and D-flat. The left hand plays a Db/F chord (F, A-flat, C, E-flat). The score is transcribed by the author.

Fig. 1.3: Excerpt from Abdullah Ibrahim's "The Mountain" (transcribed by author).

Ngqawana recorded a number of Ibrahim compositions or Ibrahim's arrangements of traditional songs. On *Zimphonic Suites* Ngqawana recorded Ibrahim's "Beautiful Love" as well as his arrangement of the traditional piece "Chisa". On Ngqawana's later album, *Vadzimu*, he records "Tafelberg/Carnival samba", a composition based on the structure of a "klops carnival liedjie" originally composed by Peter Appolis on which Ibrahim expanded for his album *Mantra Mode*.

Ngqawana's effective use of his voice and arrangements of traditional Xhosa songs formed an important part of his overall artistic personality. From his very first solo album, he featured a number of his own impressions of traditional songs, an element of his music making that he would never abandon in performance and on recorded works. Earlier in this thesis I briefly reflected on the interesting dynamic present in Ngqawana's work, where on the one hand he was essentially an avant-gardist playing within an atonal sound world, and on the other he played and sang melodies that captured the ears of a large audience. The general appeal of his music can be attributed to Ngqawana's performances of traditional songs. His arrangement of "Qula Kwedini", a very important song in the male circumcision ritual in Xhosa culture, was released on his first solo album, *Zimology* (1998). This rendition propelled him into the mainstream of South

African music with widespread radio play and a large (at least larger than usual for South African jazz) number of album sales. Ngqawana continued this on his second album *Zimphonic Suites*, where he recorded arrangements of “Ebhofolo” and “Chisa”. While recording arrangements of traditional songs is not uncommon among jazz musicians in South Africa, Ngqawana’s versions of particularly “Qula Kwedini” and “Ebhofolo” have become influential among the contemporary generation of South African jazz musicians who often perform his arrangements.

Ngqawana’s flowing performances felt like a meditation. I remember seeing a number of people transfixed in contemplation at our many informal performances at the Zimology Institute. These performances were best remembered for the intensity and commitment involved. Music was a portal to something else, some alternative version of reality for Ngqawana. We very rarely spoke about music, and almost never of anything theoretical or technical. Instead Ngqawana would speak about his ideas: ideas about anything which he somehow related back to the music. In a way he wasn’t interested in the same musical goals as most other musicians. While he was committed to achieving excellence, it was a notion of excellence that he defined for himself.

He always tried to continue evolving and to follow where the music wanted itself to go. I, like many other musicians, make every effort to control music, to shape it in a way that achieves a certain goal, whether that goal be current or contemporary, or to sell albums or curate something appropriate for touring. In my experience of Ngqawana, he seemed to have little concern for these considerations. His music was constantly evolving to become more complex, freer and increasingly more difficult for audiences to follow. One of the most vivid memories I have is of Ngqawana pulling me aside before a duo concert we played at Cape Town’s City Hall. He said, “you play you and I will play me and we’ll meet somewhere in the music. The audience may have come here this evening to hear ‘Qula [Kwedini]’ and the other hits, but the music is moving forward”. That night we played a concert of free improvisations.

As an artist I can attest to the courage it takes to adopt such an attitude in music, one that at this stage of my career I have been able to commit to. When one becomes freer and more searching in the music, the audiences will not be as large as it was when you were playing conventional song forms. Ngqawana was a true leader in that sense. As a member of the contemporary community of South African jazz musicians I can say that Bra Zim, as he was and remains affectionately known to us, influenced many in the new generation both musically and philosophically. Because of his contributions, many of us younger musicians are showing the courage to embark on artistic endeavors that challenge the norm.

Bra Zim exemplified the spirit of the searching musician and the African Renaissance man. A quote in the liner notes of *Zimphonic Suites* by Chinweizu, a Nigerian critic, essayist, poet and journalist, perhaps best describes Ngqawana and that very spirit which he taught us at the Zimology Institute, a time in my life of which I harbour the fondest memories:

Another indispensable ingredient in a renaissance is creativity. A renewal of tradition demands a study of exemplars and techniques of the tradition to be renewed. It demands an outburst of experimental energy that is boldly critical of all that has gone before, that boldly cannibalizes all influences. It demands an inventive, synthesizing energy that bravely and unabashedly borrows from everywhere, whatever it finds useful.

Closing

The considerations on Ibrahim and Ngqawana discussed in this chapter, constitute my attempts to make meaning of the notion of the individualism of artistic voice. That these

considerations move from observations to anecdotes, from literature to performances, from music to statements, indicates that this notion of individuality is located somewhere in between these categories of discourse. Ibrahim and Ngqawana's highly individualistic sound palettes and approaches to realising their artistic personalities have, to me, been an invaluable experience to study. As a developing musician, I found their very individual approaches to artistic development, composition, improvisation and performance to be highly influential and the implementation of certain aspects of what I have learnt from these musicians have helped me develop in a career that has now spanned over a decade with concerts in 18 countries around the world and the release of seven albums. Part of what makes these musicians important, is also the influence they have on subsequent generations. Ngqawana and Ibrahim have profoundly influenced my musical and career decisions. In the following chapter I discuss my own practise as a response to this influence.

Chapter 2

An Auto-Ethnographic Reflection on Process

Most of my earlier work is based on my idea of creating sound as “A Portrait of Home”, also the title of my second album (2010). The idea of home is invoked not only as a geographic space but as an internal space of rootedness, not as an anchor but as a springboard. In essence, I was following Abdullah Ibrahim’s advice: “When you write about something, write about what you know” (Ibrahim, 2016). This was a process of discovering what I knew.

Some of this knowledge derives from my own musical background. My musical upbringing was in classical music as I took violin lessons from the age of five until I was sixteen, after which I became interested in jazz, improvisation, composition and the piano. This interest is most likely attributed to the fact that my mother, Michele Shepherd, was working at Abdullah Ibrahim’s music school, M7, which was in Parliament Street in Cape Town at the time. I spent time with Ibrahim and other musicians at M7, both in their conversational company and listening to them play live in concert. Both conversations and performances were important in my development, but especially the frequent solo piano performances by Ibrahim affected me profoundly, and I realised that if I were to continue in music it would be because these performances constituted the reality I believed in. I wanted to perform and create music with the type of personal emotional expression I had failed to experience in playing classical music, and I decided that the only way for me to achieve this was through improvisation and jazz. The piano lent itself well to composition and enabled a self-sufficiency I still enjoy to this day. I dove into the instrument, teaching myself and composing from the start. Two years later, I was playing professionally while I was still in my final year of high school.

Questions of identity encouraged me to explore the sounds of my immediate cultural and musical environment, necessitating a study of the music of Cape Town and South Africa. My study included the music of the minstrel bands, Malay choirs, *nagtroepe*, Christmas choirs, Christian hymns (I grew up as an Anglican) and Islamic calls to prayer – sounds that were familiar to me from the variety of Cape neighbourhoods in which I grew up. Outside of Cape Town, the rest of South Africa also provided fascinating musical materials. Through borrowed, bought or copied CDs too numerous to recall, I became acquainted with the sounds of Xhosa bow music (*umrhubhe* and *uhadi*), Khoi-San chants and tribal music of the Zulu, Pondo, Pedi and Shangaan cultural groups, which were all richly evocative. I proceeded to implement my engagements with these sounds on the piano. Later, the music of other African countries became a fascination, such as the Wassoulou music from Mali (for instance Omou Sangaré's *Worotan*, 1996), Shona *mbira* music from Zimbabwe (the compilation CD *Africa: Zimbabwe - Shona Mbira Music* is one example) and Gnawa music from Morocco (for instance Mamoud Ghania and Abdellah, *Eat The Dream: Gnawa Music from Essaouira*). Along with this enquiry into the music of my immediate environment as well as continental Africa, I also immersed myself in the music of the American jazz masters. I took a keen interest in the work of Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk (following in the footsteps of Ibrahim, who count these musicians among his key influences), Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny and Keith Jarrett. As my understanding of jazz grew, I began to seek out local Cape Town musicians who were playing either in the South African jazz style, like Errol Dyers, Robbie Jansen and Hilton Schilder in particular, and others who frequently performed in the American jazz styles, like Alwyn Dyers, Andrew Lilley, Buddy Wells, Charles Lazaar, Kesivan Naidoo, and most notably the multi-instrumentalist Mark Fransman and pianist Andre Peterson, who were friends and mentors to me.

After twelve years of playing professionally, composing and immersing myself in the traditions of the music, my focus is now on the connection between historical and contemporary practices. I strive to be firmly grounded in the musical traditions of my immediate environment, while also expressing influences from around the world. My

desire is to create a musical bridge between the South African music with which I familiarised myself in my early work and a more overtly modern sound. I also stay attuned to contemporary pop music, rock and electronica from around the world, which has shaped the direction I currently pursue in my compositional approach and in the way I put together my various groups (I discuss this in greater detail below). In terms of my performance work, I have invested most time in my trio, for which I have composed music that incorporates input from each player. I endeavour to make each of us somehow emotionally engaged with the material, and view consultation as essential to achieving this as opposed to the composer (myself) providing all the material and suggesting the direction of that material in an authoritarian manner.

Reflecting on my early development, it strikes me that in my experience the jazz process is phenomenological, by which I mean that it entails being involved in the process of playing, composing and improvising to build a knowledge base. As Paul Berliner (1994, 41) writes, “as essential to students as technical information and counsel is the understanding of jazz acquired through performance”. Artistic development commonly takes place after the initial learning phase of the basics of jazz theory and performance, as well as a thorough knowledge of the canonical works and players in the history of the music. “Making music is its own kind of research,” Vijay Iyer asserts (in Hoffman, 2012: 4), “[t]he musicians that I like are experimenting constantly, testing ideas with an audience night after night, and trying to push the boundaries of what they know” (ibid.). Iyer’s statement suggests that beyond a basic level, learning jazz becomes a process of growth through experimentation.

When a jazz musician is younger in the music (not specifically in age), the initial stage of study entails learning from the elders (in music) in their immediate environment as well as from the seminal recordings of key players in jazz history (“key”, naturally, being subjective). However, experimentation and personal development through playing, and the interrogation thereof, is also vital. For example, jam sessions are essential for any player, particularly younger players. Here, musicians (whether they were personally acquainted or not) would play and improvise on the standard jazz

repertoire together. These sessions provide a platform suited to experimentation with approaches to playing, sometimes beyond a musician's existing knowledge base, yet remaining within the familiarity of the standard jazz repertoire. As Berliner (1994, 42) observes, “[a]t these informal musical get-togethers, improvisers are free of the constraints that a commercial engagement places upon repertory, length of performance, and the freedom to take artistic risks.”

In Cape Town, a weekly jam session run by guitarist Alwyn Dyers at the “Swingers jazz club” in Wetton used to be the training ground for many of my generation of jazz musicians in Cape Town. It was here that we played with our peers, but most importantly we regularly had the opportunity to sit in with elder, more experienced and more skilled musicians. Many of us also “graduated” to be part of the house band led by Dyers, which I recall as an invaluable experience as it accelerated my development. I went on to play professionally for a few years, mostly jazz standards in restaurants and at functions, prompting new types of questions which I had a burning desire to answer before becoming a solo artist playing original music. These questions centered around the purpose of my music making and were made acute by my dream of achieving the type of artistry I saw in Ibrahim, Ngqawana, Schilder and Mombelli. The type of questions I would frequently ask myself were: What is the process for an artist to reach the stage where s/he contributes artistically, in other words where they reach a level of attainment that is beyond the development of a basic technique? Whether thinking about young players, or elder masters like Ibrahim and Jarrett: What is the course their development process took, and how do I embark on such a course?

Artistic process

The artistic process is by nature subjective, difficult to define and explain; hence the challenges of practice-based research. As a composer, improviser and person who engages in creating something from nothing on a daily basis, however, I find these challenges compelling. The question of where compositions and ideas come from is one that I do not have a definitive answer to, but as for my process I can say that it is

simultaneously an intuitive and intellectual process. The initial phase of an idea is intuitive in the sense that it constitutes an awareness that goes beyond a practice routine, although this awareness often manifests amidst the mechanics of practice. Including improvisation in my practice is on the one hand counter-intuitive to the mechanical practice of technique, but it makes for exploratory practice, where I can go through the mechanics of technical practice while remaining attentive and receptive to the moment when the impulse of an intuitive process begins. That's when the composer takes over from the player.

I have found that a mental, decision-based element exists and happens in real time in the practice room and on stage. Every note of every phrase is a decision. Pianist Matthew Shipp's (in Reitzes, 1999) description of recording an album captures how this process, oscillating between the familiar/planned/mechanical and the exploratory/improvisatory, works:

Some things are predominantly scored. Some things are nothing except for a verbal instruction, which could be as little as colour or as much as giving him a group of notes and a rhythm and telling him what to do with it. Or sometimes just like chord changes on a piece of paper and a directional idea. Sometimes one part is completely written and everything else is improvised. There's a piece on an upcoming album with Matt Maneri where the piano part is written out totally and I just tell him to improvise over it. Sometimes I come out with a violin line written and I improvise the accompaniment. Some things are totally improvised, some things are totally written. How you go about putting a section together definitely determines the character of it. Depending on the character you're looking at, the methodology is different all the time. Basically for that album [a duo with Roscoe Mitchell], we spent all day in the studio. I didn't give him any [music] – his parts were all improvised. I planned a bunch of stuff I was going to do and I knew how he would react, because in rehearsals throughout the years with his group, I was kind of reacting on maybe sections of music he had written – and of course I came up with his music. And then for this album I further

abstracted that. Like, I would come up with parts that were based on parts I had come up with on my own in the context of his music. Right, so then I further abstracted it and came up with a bunch of gestural ideas and piano parts based on that, knowing he would react in certain ways because we had kind of covered those areas accidentally in rehearsals or maybe, like, once in a performance and I remembered it. So I came up with something knowing that in a performance of this piece, this accidentally happened once two years ago and he reacted that way. So I scripted a piano part knowing he would probably react similarly.

I quoted this passage at length, because it illustrates an approach to composition that is a combination of improvisation, musical personality dynamics (when playing with others) and situational awareness. This is the very essence of the jazz music-making process, where improvisation is entangled with composition and social awareness. Situational awareness in performances and/or in recording sessions/rehearsals, which I explore in the next section, is an important dimension for the jazz player/composer to engage with.

Performance as situational awareness

In addition to the compositional/improvisational dynamics at work in a particular piece, decision-making in live performance also includes decisions about which composition to flow into, when to bring in the band, when to make space for the other players to improvise and when to explore an improvised introduction or ending (a common element of the piano trio is for the pianist to improvise an intro or outro to a piece based on the piece it precedes or follows). All this happens in an active, embodied way in the moment. It is perhaps why improvisation is among the most difficult things to do in music. Not only are phrases improvised, but also touch, fingering, tempo, pedaling and dynamics are all decided intuitively in the moment.

My approach to concerts has always been to play my own compositions. However, I never decide on a set list, as I like to use my intuition to absorb the feeling of the room in terms of the audience and the acoustics. The unfolding of the programme is decided

in the moment along with the decision-making process I describe above. I have always thought of performance as a happening, something that is alive, and a response to the situation in which the players find themselves. Playing in many different countries has honed this situational awareness and the ability to discern and submit to the specifics of a moment. If I am to be true to the intuitive aspect of performance, then I must be prepared to be moved into uncomfortable and unknown spaces in the music. It is not enough merely to rehash a well-practiced performance.

Whether a performer has played a composition many times or not (and sometimes it is better if not), jazz requires an exploration of themes. For a jazz musician, the necessity to forge new pathways within the music is inescapable. As a leader, I have always preferred to hear my fellow musicians thinking and submitting to the flow of the moment in an unplanned way, even if the material we are playing consists of set compositions. Similar to sport, the flow state is paramount to an inspired performance, as much as the mechanics of playing the instrument is. All judgment and self-criticism is set aside and left for the practice room. When on stage, the requirement is to be totally present and aware of the music in that particular moment and space. The difficulty of doing this makes truly inspired performances an uncommon phenomenon. One often hears a musician describing an inspired performance by saying that they felt as though they “lost themselves” in the music. It is this total loss of inhibitions that I aspire to in every performance. I have always attempted to play with an intention beyond merely sounding good. And I believe that with a situational awareness and complete acceptance, one is able to play the notes that are perfect for that moment, for the geographic environment and acoustical space.

At the heart of this process, however, is a paradox: on one hand the process of creation in performance that I have described is introspective, and the other it includes an external attentiveness to audience, co-musicians and performance space that the notion of situational awareness suggests. This is a paradox that many musicians are aware of. When Jason Moran asked Andrew Hill about his thoughts on solo concerts, Hill replied, “I only respond to the audience’s energy” (Hill in Moran, 2014). Brad Mehldau (2007)

commented on certain ground-breaking musicians like Miles Davis and John Coltrane's relationship with audiences: "It's like they're saying 'Fuck you, I love you', they're gonna do whatever they want and assert their own will and not worry about how it's going to be understood. Yet the wonderful thing about that is that it speaks to people". A turbulent relationship is still a relationship, and Mehlau's observation speaks to a deep sense of appreciation of the role of the audience.

In my opinion, audiences have, for as long as the concert-going experience has existed, completely underestimated their important role in the music-making process. Performers involved in an intuitive process, i.e. improvising, are receptors of the energy people radiate. Many performers flow on the good vibration of a room full of people they subconsciously know are there to listen and experience their music wholeheartedly. Mehlau's description shows that the performer-audience relationship is one of respect in the way musicians expect the audience to "get it". It is not indicative of a willingness to compromise the performance for the sake of anyone who may not be able to follow.

This commitment is something influential artists have in common; an ethos I aspire to and attempt to emulate on every occasion. My commitment is to being intuitively connected to the moment. Even though I predominantly play predetermined original compositions, there is scope for exploration within any piece and physical situation. Below I focus on some of the ideas introduced in this section, and describe how they are implemented in particular forms of my practise. I will structure my discussion according to the formats that I most commonly perform and work in: solo, trio and film music.

Solo playing

I approach solo playing as a completely different performance practice to that of trio and bigger ensemble playing. With fellow musicians, the sense of community and musicianship within the practice of playing together is what creates the beauty. The individuality of each player in a group set-up is what creates a canvas to which the song and improvisation add colour and texture. Within a solo framework, however, the

solitude allows for deeper exploration of the pianist as composer/improviser. It constitutes an emotionally charged intellectual exploration of themes and improvisation (whether within the framework of a composition or not).

In essence, solo playing addresses, in a highly introspective manner, the past (that which was studied), the present (the current musical level of the player) and the future (revealed through the exploratory element of improvisation). Introspection entails that the artist/musician/performer becomes an acutely attentive listener within this situation. The criterion in solo playing is that the musician explores himself, as opposed to a group setting where the musicality and individuality of two or more players are equally considered and accommodated.

With solo performances, much of the quality and potential impact of the music has to do with my personal state of mind at the time of the performance. As it is such an introspective process, I find that my preparation is more mental than physical. Preparing my mind for any eventuality is often the most important part of my preparation (musical preparation is, of course, a given). With my trio there is always a safety net. If I am not in tune with the moment I can rely on one or both of my fellow musicians to provide sufficient musical substance to inspire me out of the lull. With solo playing, however, it is only me, the instrument and the audience. Often a self-induced “letting go” is required moments before walking on the stage. One is vulnerable when you are sitting alone in front of an audience, and the vulnerability becomes exponentially more powerful the larger the audience and prestige of the occasion or venue. To fight this, I often have to recite a type of mantra to myself, one that subjectively reassures me of the validity of the work, whether true or not, and its ability to stand on its own. The task is to “let go” of any mental hindrances that may obstruct the flow of the music.

This “letting go” was probably the most valuable aspect of music I learned during my brief and informal tuition at the Zimology Institute where I was an apprentice of Zim Ngqawana. Ngqawana always encouraged one to know the basics of skilful playing and for one to reach a point of competence, but also to be familiar with letting go of those

learned “safety nets”. In hindsight, I realise that the highest of artistic endeavours often involve going beyond technical skill. It begs the question: “What is beyond compositional and playing technique?” Going “beyond” includes going beyond what is often considered as the aesthetic part of music, described with such superlatives as “beautiful”, “skillful” and “masterful”. In my practice, the “letting go” state in performance is achieved once one has succeeded in overcoming the idea of placing particular importance on conventional aesthetic considerations. The best musicians absorb the conventions of aesthetic beauty and technical mastery, and go further to deliver performances that are inspired. When we move beyond what’s aesthetically beautiful and pleasing to the ear, then creativity in sound creation becomes possible. This is what I consider to be the post-competence element of performance: the elements that take the music beyond what constitutes mere musical competence (like the correct notes, technique, interpretation etc.).

Trio

An important part of music making is musical fellowship. Finding common ground among a group of players, often stemming from common ideals of musical aesthetics, is incredibly joyful and musically enriching. Although solo performances have, by virtue of its challenges, always been held in high regard, the most seminal and celebrated jazz of all eras emerged from group settings. As Threadgill (in Iverson, n.d.) puts it, “you make music the same way you have baseball teams, football teams and basketball teams: [...] with some great key players. The Duke Ellington Orchestra would not have sounded like that with just anybody in the orchestra”. In other words, the individuals comprising the group and the resulting chemistry is what moves us.

When playing in piano trio, the format in which I most frequently perform, the responsibility for exploration rests on all three players, each feeding off the other in a symbiotic relationship that requires attentive commitment. The compositions may be new or older, but according to the aesthetic that was decided among the group, the

direction is unspoken but clear. I have chosen to play with Shane Cooper (double bass) and Jonno Sweetman (drums) for the last eight years. As each individual in the band comes from a varied musical background, writing music for the group and finding common ground is a challenge.

In our early years, I presented a singular vision to Shane and Jonno of what I wanted in the music. I was steeped in the study of Cape Town and South African jazz. As we evolved as a trio in subsequent years, I felt that the group stopped progressing and I realised that in order to find further directions to explore, I should pay attention to the musicians I play with. I thought that if I listed the musical influences and backgrounds of all three of us, I would end up with a more diverse and complex register of possibilities. Most notable was the fact that my musical foundation was completely different to that of Shane and Jonno, who had more musical common ground with one another than I had with either of them. I saw this as an opportunity for me to grow, and I started to listen to the musicians that Cooper and Sweetman were talking about when we were together on tours. This exploration took me to rock musicians, electronic and contemporary musicians like Flying Lotus (*Cosmogramma*), Deantoni Parks (*Technoself - Bombay*), Thom Yorke (*The Eraser*), Ryuichi Sakamoto and Alva Noto (*UTP_*) to name a few. The use of unconventional instrumentation, form and the general sound aesthetic created by these electronic musicians offer a completely new set of possibilities to the sometimes static-sounding jazz band. This is particularly true if one considers that the jazz trio has for a long time had (and continues to have) a standard instrumentation, comprised of piano, double bass and drums. Electronic music opened a completely new soundworld for me, and the possibilities it offered for sound creation unshackled by the conventions of what is considered aesthetically pleasing in jazz, greatly stimulated my musical imagination. In this way it connected to the idea of achieving post-competence: to me it presented a shift in focus from technically skillful music to the creation of sound and texture. It is to these ideas that I owe my career as a film composer where, as I will discuss later, the creation of sound and texture takes precedence over virtuosity.

After researching and considering the musical influences of Shane and Jonno, I decided to write music not only for my personal expression, but for all three of us in the trio to express “our” personal sounds. I found it useful to present compositions that were 90% complete in order to leave space for the composition to be completed by the other players.

In an interview I conducted with Jonno Sweetman (2016), he reflects on this development from his perspective on the drum chair. In the spirit of giving voice to each member of the trio, I quote him (and later Shane Cooper) at length, as these quotations capture the dynamic from another perspective than my own:

The way to start talking about it [the Kyle Shepherd Trio] would be how, from my perspective, how the band was formed from the beginning. Kyle’s music was already being played in a sort of a bigger band setting, with [his] FineART Quartet. That was with Claude Cozens on drums, Dylan Tabisher on bass and Buddy Wells on sax. That was, from what I could hear, a take on the traditional Cape jazz sound. I got a call to do a gig with Kyle in early 2008. That gig took me by surprise a little bit because Kyle was playing alto saxophone and Shane was playing electric bass. My first take on it was like “ok cool we’re gonna do something very modern”, and I sort of went into an approach where I was thinking very much along the lines of cross over electronica music and very third stream rock contemporary kind of stuff I was thinking about at that stage. And I came with that kind of sensibility.

When we started playing the music, I realised that Kyle was not on that thing and he was very much still on the journey of traditional Cape music and that sort of sound. So the first initial gig for me personally was a thing of like “Ok cool. I think I’ve got this wrong” and in a way I don’t think it was a negative thing at all. I think it was just a realisation and instead of me thinking this is not for me, I just felt that there was something really deep in this music and I really wanted to be a part of it. And then after those initial gigs he booked me for a concert where

he was playing piano and we delved into the traditional sound and we had done some rehearsals as well and it was very much about getting to grips with the ethnic sounds of the Khoi-San, stuff that Abdullah Ibrahim was doing and the drummers that played with him. That's a sound that I was aware of but had never worked on. So that was the start for me. I took it on and really immersed myself. I felt it wasn't something that just happened easily, it was something I had to search for and after the first year I felt like something really special was happening and I started to fall in love with the music and understand where Kyle was coming from. From then on the music has slowly evolved and it's become slightly more towards what I initially thought it was. And I think that's really the thread because initially Kyle was also on that journey and we've met somewhere later on.

And I think now playing in a trio format, which is smaller than some of the other big ensembles like the quintets and sextets that we played in early on, I think that's really made it free to explore any sort of ideology or new sound or anything. So, Kyle brings all the music and we interpret it. There's a lot of freedom given to me to play against the rhythm or play with it. I don't need to read the chart. It's initially just an outline or a sketch. Often the rhythms and the composition when we first get it is not something that I can hear and immediately get a sense for, but it's something that I also have to search for. I guess that's something else that comes to mind is that the music is becoming more natural to me but it's very much a thing of searching for me. I search to find Kyle's ideas and once I find them I have this complete freedom because I've worked for it in my own mind. It's a special thing. There's a lot of freedom in it but there's also a lot of searching. So, the combination of all of that makes this trio which to me is one of the most important parts of my career. It's one of the most important works that I'm doing at the moment.

As a group, we have had two discernible periods: the early years when I presented my musical vision that was steeped in the traditions of South African jazz, and the period

we are currently in, where we explore “borderless” sounds. Currently, being connected to contemporary society is more important to me than ever. Jazz was never intended to be a preservationist art. Revivalism has its place in jazz modernism; there is an unspoken rule that a player should always show “where he comes from” musically, if not geographically. However, it is also important to reference one’s roots in a way that has one foot in history and the other in the contemporary. This is not prescriptive of the way all jazz musicians should approach their art, but it certainly is the ethos embraced by many of the contemporary jazz artists that I currently listen to in shaping my own direction.

Particularly with the trio, I think of my performances as explorations into multi-tonality, a cliff-dive into multi-metric themes with an overarching commitment to taking people on a journey into themselves and back. This journey is on one hand a sonic autobiography of each player, but also a creation of a sonic image in performance which, almost like a reflector, enables the audience to form their own ideas and emotions.

In an interview, I asked the other member of the trio, Shane Cooper (2016), to comment on the processes involved in playing in my trio:

I often think of the three pillars of music as shapes: rhythm, harmony and melody, forming shapes to create different levels of detail in sound pictures. Creating environments, aural environments and sonic environments. Spaces with depth and shape that can have different interpretations depending on your perception and understanding of music and references and so on. And I think Kyle creates a highly advanced level of musical environments and sonic environments through his varied approaches to these three pillars.

Often times in your typical rhythm section format or trio format, the fundamental responsibility of each group member (in a piano trio specifically) would be that of rhythm supplying something of a train track, if I can use the metaphor of a train which is always useful in music. The drums create the train track, the bass

creates the body of the train and the harmony and melody, particularly from the piano, create the characters inside the train and the scenes going on inside the train ... the stories of the music. These are the things that people remember after a concert or listening to a recording. The melody, the harmony, the emotion it creates and the lives of these people in the cabin, if you are looking from a zoomed-out perspective.

Whereas Kyle allows the trio to alternate roles, switch roles and morph these roles in a very organic way that allows for looking at this train almost from an alternate universe perspective, flipping it inside out, upside down, changing the colour spectrum, all sorts of ways you can look at one particular scene and have different perceptions of it. He can simultaneously observe both sides of the coin and let you explore these sides freely as a member of the trio, and I think this is something that the audience can also observe because there's an amount of risk-taking on the bandstand that is palatable and is a result of allowing this equation to take place. I think an audience member can be excited by this, realising the amount of freedom and the amount of risk this approach employs. Therefore creating a very exciting sound and approach to contemporary jazz that is at the very tip of time, at any given moment it is at the very tip of time.

I think that it excites me in that regard even more than free improvised music because we are playing around themes and structures but I feel that there is an energy and a risk that is as potent as you find in free improvised music, but it is even further propelled by the strength of Kyle's themes, melodic and harmonic content. Now he also draws from a wide variety of influences in his music, which shows his broad understanding of various styles both contemporary and classic within in jazz, classical, African, South African music, rock music and more. [Elements] that are used in a very organic way in his writing and he encourages Jonno Sweetman and myself to explore other influences that we have from our individual interests and tastes outside of jazz and what one might come to expect from a jazz trio typically, which leads even further to very open fields

of sound and music that we are enabled to explore through his approach as a band leader and composer.

There is also much freedom within a performance to push and pull in a healthy relationship between the 3 of us where Kyle is the leader and he has first say in the direction of composition in the rehearsal room as well as on the bandstand but there is also a freedom to also pull the group into another direction and openness within the group to take a left turn at any given moment which adds to the group as well (2016).

Vijay Iyer's description of his own particular group playing process is one to which I subscribe as well: "In a non-'soloistic' way of improvising, we can build something together. See what other constructions can come out that way. It's basically a rhythm section mentality, a rhythm player's mentality. In the rhythm section you're always improvising anyway. Even if you're playing a song, every sound you make is a choice. And you're making choices relationally with regard to what everyone else is doing" (quoted in Moran 2014). I think of group playing, and especially band leading, as an exercise in managing individuals in order to get the best possible level of playing from each one of the group. To achieve this, my approach has been to create a group dynamic where everyone contributes to the outcome of the music and sufficient space is made for each individual's musical voice to be heard, even in my own compositions and playing. In this way, the music is always on a higher level than if I were to imagine everything by myself. Perhaps this is why the existence of improvisation is so integral to the character of jazz. Even though the composer suggests the themes, structure and feel of the music, the players, through their improvisation, inevitably bring something of themselves to the music.

Music for Film

What attracted me to writing music for films is the emotional anonymity of the process. As a solo artist, I have written over 150 short and long compositions for a varied range

of ensembles, and every bit of the process of composing each one of those pieces has been an emotionally draining experience. When one is composing your own music, without any predetermined programme, it is *tabula rasa*, the daunting blank page in its truest and most unnerving sense. In film, however, the composer can be at a remove from the emotional content. The emotional framework, and often the sound palette as well, come from the script, the picture and from the on-screen performances. In my experience, this releases me as composer from the responsibility of creating the narrative. The narrative is already there, and the job of the film composer is to underscore that narrative and to provide the underlying emotional backbone of the story.

As the emphasis in film music is not on a skilful display of virtuosity, one has to place aside all previously acquired skill honed in the practice of jazz and classical music, in favour of the creation of textures through sound production and instrumentation. Sound production, to the point of stepping into the role of sound engineer, is very important in film composing. What is important is not only the musical content of your composition but also its production and recording, which in turn becomes a compositional tool. A film composer's room looks more like a recording studio: as you compose you are also producing the composition. For example, an eight-bar melody for a solo cello might sound a certain way in the composer's mind, but it might sound five different ways depending on which type of reverb or other effects he uses to process the recording of that melody. These production decisions, which would usually be made by the recording engineer if one were to be recording a jazz album, is often made by the composer as a compositional decision in film scoring.

Given that all sectors of film production are hedged by limitations (limited time and budget, most commonly), compositional ideas have to come to fruition within a very short space of time. This limited timeframe is further intensified by the requirements of the film director and producers to hear music that is as close as possible to the finished product even at the very early stages of composing. With all this in mind, and considering the cost of recording live musicians, composers use a tool called MIDI samples and music production software to create demo versions of each piece.

MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) samples are electronically generated sounds that imitate real instruments. Recent technological advances have made it possible to sample real instruments, i.e. record each note with every possible velocity and interpretation variance, and feed each recorded note into a sampler where it can be stored, called upon and played via a MIDI controller. For example, one could sample a violin and then sound the music with the recorded notes, via MIDI, without having a violinist present. This technique is used by composers to create demos throughout the composing process of the film, which can then be revised and ultimately approved, after suggested change requests, by the director and producers.

In terms of the composition process, an interesting question arose for me considering the above-mentioned techniques for film music composition. Does composing with electronic samples of real instruments, which effectively means composing and orchestrating simultaneously, have any influence on the outcome and type of musical devices employed in the composition? In other words, is it an advantage or hindrance to the composer to have an electronic replica of every instrument one can think of (certainly all the instruments in a symphony orchestra) at his disposal? In my experience, and this may be completely different for any other composer, the answer is that it is idiomatically problematic, although it does aid quick workflow. The idiomatic problem is that of a pianist composing violin music at the piano. The musical elements will be there, but the risk exists that one could lapse into the pattern of composing pianistically by virtue of being a pianist composing at the piano.

Instrumentalists have habits etched into muscle memory and an arsenal of musical devices they draw on repeatedly. In my experience of composing orchestral music using electronic samples triggered by a MIDI keyboard controller, I frequently revert to my pianistic habits, even though the sound coming from my studio computer is that of a violin, cello or woodwind instrument. This unidiomatic result is compounded by the limited ability of the electronic sample to achieve varied and lifelike articulation. It is important to note that in most cases, depending on the film's budget, the electronic

version of the compositions are merely working demos. These are discussed at length with the director, who will suggest changes depending on how the piece fits with the emotional spectrum of the film, as well as the timing of the actors' performances, etc. After many edits, these demo mock-ups are finally approved, notated and recorded with live musicians.

I find the contrast between creating music in the jazz world and creating music in the world of film to be incredibly interesting for any person who is a performer as well as someone interested in sound production. Having an opportunity to produce work in these two contrasting contexts is musically very rewarding. In jazz, the focal point is often the ability of the player, whereas in film it is on how strongly the composer's emotional palette translates to the picture and ultimately the emotional reception and response of the audience. This shift is interesting, since as a piano player one practices and researches for years to become technically proficient, but as a film composer you do not want to be stuck in the world of only creating virtuosic music. Sometimes a noise drone (without melody, harmony or rhythm) created by a modular synthesizer is all that is required for a scene. I have found that being able to work as a jazz pianist/composer in some cases, and as a film music composer in others, benefits my general musical outlook and development. Although they are worlds apart, they work together in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

To close

My music has progressed through a development process from being overtly South African sounding, as it was at the beginning of my career, to having a South Africanism at its core. Currently it is an assimilation of the history of South African pianism while looking to go beyond this history. Its intrinsic nature is South African, but the pianism and the music it serves include many other elements irrespective of geographical places of origin or borders. The process for an artist entails the constant redefinition of ideals and motivation that is essential to the becoming of the art. This process is inclusive of widely contrasting ideologies in artistic approach. Some artists have a clearly defined

sound in which they play and create consciously and they make great efforts to preserve this sound. This approach is completely musically valid, and it takes up the challenge of developing artistically authentic music. In contrast, there are other artists who manage to remain open in their approach, without a clearly defined sound and with an enduring interest in a varied and ever developing sound palette. My attempt is to incorporate, in varying degrees, both of these approaches represented to some degree by Ibrahim and Ngqawana.

Chapter 3

A reflection on the works submitted for performance

Performance, by its very nature, is a result of years of process. As I have argued in the previous chapters, any performance at any given time is a result of accumulated influences, depth of practice and research as well the development of an artist's vision. In the performances submitted as performance portfolio for this degree I display both the accumulation of influences I have drawn from Abdullah Ibrahim and Zim Ngqawana (discussed in Chapter 1), and my own artistic development and processes (as articulated in Chapter 2).

It is important to state that these live performances are exercises in spontaneity, openness and musical acceptance of the moment, despite the material being pre-composed. A commonality in all my performances is space for improvisation, exploration within and beyond the composed material, and the requirement for self-expression of all musicians involved. This is not unique in jazz practice, but this is a particularly important aspect for me to continually include in my performances.

Performance 1

My first performance submission is a full audio and video recording of a concert I did in Germany, which was part of the annual SWR New Jazz Meeting I was invited to curate in 2016. For this performance, I put together a group of musicians I felt embodied the type of balance between contemporary approach and historical rootedness I am attempting to express in my music currently.

Each player had a firm grip on tradition (whether it was with regard to the seminal periods of jazz or the music from the immediate cultural environment in which their music practice developed), as well as an awareness of and proficiency in the vocabulary of contemporary music. By “contemporary” I mean not only modern jazz, but also

contemporary classical, electronic (dance and experimental) and pop music. The concert took place after four days of recording the material live at the SWR Studios in Baden-Baden, Germany. The group features myself on piano, Lionel Loueke on guitar and vocals, Mthunzi Mvubi on alto saxophone, Shane Cooper on double bass and Jonno Sweetman on drums.

For this performance I selected more composed material than was necessary for one performance. Recalling my idea of a situational awareness in performance (discussed in Chapter 2), I wanted to have body of material that would afford me the opportunity to respond to the energy of my fellow musicians on stage, as well as the energy of the audience. Having an extended repertoire list from which I could select in real time on stage, enabled me to play with and respond to this situational awareness. I also invited Loueke to provide two original compositions. I decided to extend this invitation not only because he is one of the most celebrated composers in contemporary jazz, but also because I wanted to challenge myself to absorb and interpret his very challenging compositions in the most personal way possible. The band could flow and navigate through the music fairly easily as a result of 1) the rhythm section having played together for eight years as a trio and 2) the week the group spent working on the music together and ultimately recording it in studio.

When ,Günther Huesmann, the SWR New Jazz Meeting director, and I started discussing the lineup of musicians I would select to join me for the project, we were very clear that we wanted musicians with their own original sound and artistic voice. With regard to the compositions, the agreement was that I would bring the material (i.e. compositions) but that the musical content and arrangements would leave enough space to allow these original voices to permeate the performances. Although Cooper, Sweetman, Mvubi and myself all come from South Africa, we come from different musical backgrounds. Loueke is from Benin and now lives in New York. It was such a life-changing experience for me as a young artist to make music, learn from and communicate with someone on this musical level. Loueke shook the jazz world when he arrived in America. I remember a Herbie Hancock concert in Rotterdam in 2007 where

Hancock introduced a young guitarist from Africa, which was Loueke. Hancock described his first encounter with Loueke at an audition for The Monk Institute (besides Hancock, the panel included jazz luminaries Wayne Shorter and Terence Blanchard) as “breathtaking” and “mind-blowing”.

Loueke’s importance to me as a fellow African musician involved in jazz is due to the fact that he has taken the music of his home (his immediate environment) and combined it with the music of the jazz tradition along with sounds from contemporary twentieth and twenty-first century music, as is evident on his album *Karibu* (2008). The way he incorporates all of these influences and sensibilities so seamlessly is exactly what I am currently attempting to do in my composition and playing. In a way, Loueke has set a precedent for jazz musicians from Africa. He has firmly established his artistic footprint in the jazz world: some of the most influential and pioneering musicians, like Hancock and Dave Holland, invite him to perform with them, which in my opinion is the highest form of validation for any jazz musician.

At a time when there are an unprecedented number of professional musicians in the world, the way Loueke has “stood out” in a large crowd is a lesson for any musician in the importance of being yourself in the music and developing something authentic in your approach and sound. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, I believe that as an African musician, assimilating the sounds of one’s immediate environment while also absorbing sounds from the rest of the world is a means to create an authentic vocabulary. Developing an authentic voice in music is perhaps more important than ever in a jazz scene where there are thousands of jazz graduates from tertiary institutions around the world every year. Loueke, in my opinion, has done this with the highest artistic integrity, and is a model of what is possible as an African musician in the same way as Abdullah Ibrahim, Zim Ngqawana, Louis Moholo and Oumou Sangaré have done.

Details of Performance: The Kyle Shepherd Quintet in concert at the SWR New Jazz Meeting, Germany.

Online Link to performance 1: <https://youtu.be/5smFfomkJCY>

Details of Editing: No editing done, except to shorten applause and announcements between pieces.

Format: Video and Audio

Duration: 2 hours, 5 minutes, 43 seconds.

Venue: Tollhaus Concert Hall, Karlsruhe, Germany.

Date of Performance: 27 November 2016

Personnel:

Kyle Shepherd: Piano and synthesizer

Lionel Loueke: Guitar and Voice

Shane Cooper: Double and Electric Bass

Mthunzi Mvubu: Alto Saxophone

Jonno Sweetman: Drums

Repertoire:

All Compositions by Kyle Shepherd except “Ouidah” and Farafina” By Lionel Loueke.

1. Wassoulou Intro
2. Wassoulou
3. Reinvention/Johannesburg
4. Ouidah

5. Farafina
6. ICU
7. Loueke
8. Flying without leaving the ground
9. Xamissa

Comments on the most notable aspects of some of the compositions and arrangements for Performance 1

1 and 2. Wassoulou Intro and Wassoulou

The intro to this piece is for prepared piano and prepared guitar. The piano and guitar are both prepared with paper interwoven between the strings to imitate the sound and effects of West African instruments such as the *soku*, *kora* and in the case of the piano, the *balafon*. The introduction is based on the scale used in Wassoulou music of Mali. The scale in this case is a G \flat major pentatonic scale starting on the 2nd degree (A \flat) (see Fig. 3.1). Melodically, we are drawing on Wassoulou singers as a reference for phrasing. Rhythmically this introductory piece is semi-rubato.

Fig. 3.1: Scale used in Wassoulou music (transcribed by author).



When the full band comes in, the A section of the piece still uses the phrasing influence of Wassoulou singers, but the key centre shifts to A \flat minor, and the melodic phrase is based on the A \flat minor pentatonic scale (see Fig. 3.2).

Fig. 3.2: A section of authors' composition "Wassoulou" (transcribed by author).

The musical score for "Wassoulou" is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is A-flat minor (three flats). The first system (measures 1-4) features a 7/8 time signature, a key signature change to B-flat major (two flats) in measure 2, and a 5/16 time signature in measure 4. Chords are indicated as A-flat minor 7, B, B-flat 7(sus4), and G-flat(sus4). The second system (measures 5-7) starts with a 5/16 time signature, changes to 7/8 in measure 6, and returns to 5/16 in measure 7. Chords are A-flat minor 7, B, and G-flat(sus4). The third system (measures 8-9) begins with a 11/8 time signature and ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The key signature changes to B major (two sharps) for the final measure, which is marked with a repeat sign and a 5/16 time signature, and is repeated four times (x4).

The shift of key center to A \flat minor, hinted at by the guitarist in the introduction, was achieved by simply including a B \natural and juxtaposing it to the G \flat major pentatonic scale (as seen in Fig. 3.1). To my ear, this took us elsewhere in Africa to the Gnawa music of the nomadic people of Morocco. My description of the melody at Fig. 3.2 is a phrase

that alludes to Gnawa music melodically, and Wassoulou music in the phrasing of that melody.

3. “Reinvention/ Johannesburg”

The first part of this piece, “Reinvention”, is completely cyclical, built around a melodic ostinato played by the double bass (see Fig. 3.3). The upper chord melody, played by the piano and alto saxophone, is the accompaniment to the bass pattern (see Fig. 3.4).

Fig. 3.3: Ostinato bass line in authors composition “Reinvention/Johannesburg” (transcribed by author).

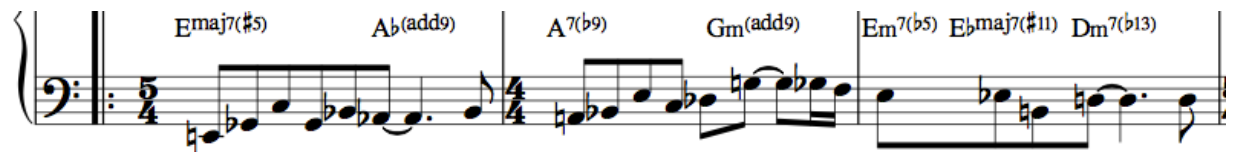


Fig. 3.4: Ostinato bass line and chord melody in “Reinvention/Johannesburg” (transcribed by author).

The solo section of this piece is based completely on this repeated bass pattern. My only instruction was to drummer: I requested that he play as much over the bar line as possible to create an uneasy and edgy feeling, while the bass pattern remains as a constant drone. As result, this pushes the soloist (in this case the pianist and later the guitarist) to play harmonically free over that chaotic “grounding”. What I didn’t anticipate when composing the piece was the spontaneous rhythmic interplay between the drummer and each soloist.

The last section of this piece, “Johannesburg” is classic *marabi*. Although *marabi* is traditionally dance music played at a danceable tempo, we decided to approach it much slower than convention would dictate. What is most important to note about this rendition is that the tempo was decided on stage and in the moment. We naturally moved into the tempo as an antidote to the frantic texture of the “Reinvention” section of the piece (27:10- 29:03 of performance 1 video). It is also worth pointing out the alto saxophonist’s approach to his improvisation over the typical three-chord harmonic cycle that characterizes *marabi*. His melodic and rhythmic approach is akin to the improvisation style created by such luminaries of South African jazz as Basil Coetzee, Robbie Jansen and Winston Mankunku, which is distinguishable in their use of diatonic melody, syncopated rhythms, vocal chant-like “cries” and a characteristic slightly out-of-tune saxophone.

6. “ICU”

This is a composition I wrote for my wife and it describes my emotional response to seeing her in the intensive care unit (ICU) after she gave birth to my daughter. The composition is intentionally chaotic, and I use layers of varied textures in the left and right hand of the piano part to portray the waves of emotions I felt when standing in the ICU. The audible pulse from the heart rate monitor is emulated by the double bass, which plays a one-note pulse throughout both sections of the piece. In the first part of the composition, I create layers through a 2/4 ostinato pattern in the left hand of the piano part (see Fig. 3.5) while the rest of the band, with exception of the drums, play a melodic stab on the fourth 16th note of beat 4 in 6/8 (see Fig. 3.6), over which the drums and the right hand of the piano improvise in a rhythmically, melodically and harmonically free manner (in other words, not bound by the rhythmic, melodic and harmonic content of the piano left hand ostinato pattern or by the melodic stab of the alto saxophone, double bass and guitar).

Fig. 3.5: Excerpt demonstrating 2/4 pattern in authors composition “ICU” (transcribed by author).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece in 2/4 time. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is a four-measure phrase. The treble staff contains a melodic line with two triplet markings over the first two measures. The bass staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern.

Fig. 3.6: 6/8 section played over 2/4 section in ICU (fig. 3.5) (Transcribed by author).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece in 6/8 time. It consists of a single treble clef staff. The music is a five-measure phrase. The first measure is a whole rest. The following four measures contain a melodic line with a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes. There are five measure numbers (1-5) written above the staff.

The solo piano introduction seen in the video is an improvisation based on three short melodic fragments of the B section of the piece (See Fig. 3.7). The melodic fragments are drawn on as a point of departure, and not played in any specific order or in any particularly organised fashion. The harmony attached to the melody (as seen in Fig. 3.7) is discarded in the piano intro in favour of an improvised harmonic texture and harmonic movement and rhythm.

Fig. 3.7: Excerpt from the melody of “ICU” (transcribed by author).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece in 5/8 time. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is a ten-measure phrase. The treble staff contains a melodic line with a triplet marking over measures 13 and 14. The bass staff contains a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. There are ten measure numbers (10-17) written above the staff. The first measure is marked "On Cue".

7. “Loueke”

This is a very simple piece based on a groove in 4/4. The notable aspect of this groove is the placement of the accent. As in most West African music (not including south western regions) the accent is played on beat 3 in 4/4, which differs from most jazz and contemporary western pop music (to name two examples), which places the accent on beat 2 and 4 in 4/4. The B section of the piece centres around a harmonic cycle (see Fig. 3.8) in 15/4 (written over of 2 bars: an 8/4 and 7/4 bar) over which an 18 bar melodic phrase is superimposed (see Fig. 3.9).

Fig. 3.8: Excerpt demonstrating the 15/4 (8/4 + 7/4) section of author’s composition “Loueke” (Transcribed by author).

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It is divided into two systems. The first system starts at measure 21 and is in 8/4 time. The second system is in 7/4 time. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The notation includes treble and bass staves with various rhythmic values and accidentals.

The guitarists’ solo outro is an improvisation based on 1) the rhythmic element and bass melody of the A section of the piece and 2) the harmonic structure of the B section chord cycle. What is remarkable is that Loueke performs three parts simultaneously (which would usually require three musicians): he imitates the percussion part by making clicking sounds with his mouth, sings the bass line and improvises free melodic and harmonic structures.

Fig. 3.9: Melody of 15/4 section of “Loueke” (Transcribed by author).

The musical score for the melody of the 15/4 section of "Loueke" is presented across 13 staves. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and the time signature is 15/4. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The piece concludes with a "D.S. al Fine" instruction and an "Open Repeats to End" section.

Performance 2

Details of Performance: The Kyle Shepherd Trio in concert.

Online link to performance 2: <https://youtu.be/W8OTgMSZFFY>

Details of Editing: No editing done except to shorten applause and announcements between pieces.

Format: Video and Audio

Duration: 1 hours 43 minutes 19 seconds.

Venue: The Reeler Theatre, Cape Town, South Africa.

Date of Performance: 25 February 2017

Personnel:

Kyle Shepherd: Piano

Shane Cooper: Double Bass

Jonno Sweetman: Drums

Repertoire:

All Compositions by Kyle Shepherd except “Too-Kah” by Abdullah Ibrahim and “A San song and a Spiritual”, which are two separate recordings of traditional songs performed by a San group and Abdullah Ibrahim. The recordings of each piece were spliced, arranged and electronically sampled with additional sounds by Kyle Shepherd.

1. A San song and a Spiritual
2. Transient

3. Wie Djy, Ai Ja (For Vijay Iyer)
4. Radha 2 (Being and Becoming)
5. Radha 1 (Fathers Love)
6. Dream State
7. Perspective Mist
8. Too-kah
9. Ou Ribbons
10. Loueke

Most notable aspects of some of the compositions and arrangements in Performance 2

1. A San Song and a spiritual

This piece is a sample that I produced electronically by splicing, reassembling and arranging parts of two recordings. The one recording is a San group singing a traditional song, and the other is Abdullah Ibrahim singing an African American spiritual taken from his album *Ode to Duke*. This type of rearrangement of prerecorded works is called a “mash-up”. It is a technique frequently used in contemporary music such as hip hop, where recorded music is sampled, spliced and combined to create a new piece.

2. Wie Djy, Ai Ja (for Vijay Iyer)

In this piece I experiment with the idea of a melody in the bass that also doubles as the bass line, with the piano and drums as the accompaniment. It is different to giving a melodic line to the bass to play: instead, I wrote a melody/bass line that could function as either an accompaniment bass part or a melody. The instrument roles revert back to their more usual functions in the B section (12:13 in Performance 2 video) where the piano picks up the melody and the bass and drums accompany.

4&6. Radha 2 and Dream State

Here the rock and contemporary pop music elements of my work are displayed. This is not only in the sound of the piece, but also in the approach to the solo sections. For

example, in “Dream State” the piano solo section is made up of repeating chords, one every 16th note, to create a cloud of sound as the dynamics of the group increase with repetition of the cycle. This is a common element in electronic and pop music, where a section is used to build dynamics, an effect intended to “hype” the crowd. In the jazz trio context, I find it an interesting way to create a dense chordal texture.

8&9. Too-Kah and Ou Ribbons

These pieces are in typically South African jazz styles. Ibrahim’s “Too-kah” is an extension of township *marabi*, while “Ou Ribbons” is in the Cape jazz/ghoema style developed by artists like Abdullah Ibrahim, Sonny Groenewald, Robbie Jansen, Hilton Schilder, Errol Dyers and Mac Mackenzie. My composition “Ou Ribbons” is dedicated to alto saxophonist Robbie Jansen. I spent two years playing piano in Jansen’s band from 2006 to 2008.

10. Louke

This is a trio version of my composition “Loueke”, also heard in the Performance 1 (SWR New Jazz Meeting recording), played by my quintet. Here I use a prepared piano technique of placing different objects in and between the strings to imitate the sound of African instruments such as the *mbira*, *balafon* and *gimbri*.

Conclusion

This description of my performances, drawing in the research and reflections on Ibrahim, Ngqawana and my own approaches, brings the thesis full circle. Auto-ethnography as a method has made underlying (and sometimes unspoken) musical processes more ‘visible’, while the auto-ethnographic and practice-based elements of this thesis necessitated a meticulous documentation of my reflections on process, development and outcomes of the music, something I had not done in such detail before. This reflection was not only a consideration of the overtly musical elements but also the social and cultural implications of the music and the constituent influences evident in

each piece or approach to improvisation. In a way, this thesis was an exercise in demonstrating how research is already built into artistic process.

My reflection on my personal practice contained in Chapter 2 is a result of more than ten years of thought. My personal approach to composition and performance is the culmination of these years of thought and is stimulated by the constant search for methods by which sufficiently to explain the ideas that are so often transmitted in real time in the moment of improvisation and performance, i.e the research that is performed in practice. In the case of my performance portfolio my own compositions, playing and band leading approach is as a result of my inculcation of this research process. The music of Ibrahim and Ngqawana and a number of their influences (both other musicians and social and geographic elements) have been my predominant influences to which I have dedicated most of my research. My performances constitute a presentation of this research in assimilated, musical form. Research into Wassoulou music and engagement with Lionel Loueke's compositions and approach to improvisation are the most prominent elements of my recent research, post-Ibrahim and post-Ngqawana, and can also be heard in my performances.

In Chapter 3 I show how research and artistic practice interact, and also provide my own selective readings of the recordings. These show how writing the music, as it were, can be both a technically exhaustive process, detailed and rigorous, but also strangely divorced in its technicality from exactly the kinds of concerns I tried to privilege in my consideration of artistic process. There is more scope for this kind of writing about structure, tonality, modes or scales, metre and rhythmic structures, texture, etc, and there is much to gain in directing more jazz writing towards such technical discourse. However, this has not been the main interest of this thesis. I have tried to show in this text how jazz musicians learn their art, and what constitute methods of knowledge transmission in the field. From the perspective of my personal artistic process, the research presented here as a thesis is the result of a self-reflexive process, transposed from the musical implementation of self-reflexive practices (experimenting with sound and using it as a constant feedback loop that influences what you do next) to an

academic exercise in “listening back” to my own development as a musician. I have tried to find a register and methodology that respect both academic conventions and my own position as a performer-composer, providing just enough technical description of my performances to allow the performances to speak with and beyond the academic text. Ultimately, I have tried to document process and practice by opening my own work to scrutiny, while working within the tension of such a vulnerable position without, hopefully, becoming defensive or self-justificatory.

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