

Under the influence of hope

By Atiyyah Khan

"In this age when jazz education is readily available within academia, Kyle's chosen to follow an authentic path. The one on which you learn directly from the creators of this art form. This path requires humility, purpose and spirituality. Kyle has realised this.

"Authenticity is another word for originality and this is evident in Kyle's compositions, arrangements and improvisation. He has managed to find a balance between the intellect and intuition. Kyle is a meditator and a poet." - Zim Ngqawana

How many people can say they grew up swapping philosophies with the likes of Abdullah Ibrahim? Enter the 21-year-old composer and multi-instrumentalist, Kyle Shepherd.

Wise beyond his years, Shepherd was raised by a single mom who was a violinist and music teacher at Ibrahim's M7 Academy.

It was by default that he ran into people like Ibrahim regularly. At the age of eight he took up the violin and by 15 he'd taught himself to play the piano, having been inspired by Ibrahim.

"You know, influence always sits with you. When I started it was kind of an obsessive playing - bunking school to go M7 to play at what I thought was the 'proper school'."

By his last year of high school he was performing with Cape musos such as Robbie Jansen and Errol Dyers. At about this time, Shepherd picked up the saxophone and taught himself how to play.

This self-taught obsession came mostly from watching videos of jazz masters like John Coltrane and resulted in him being awarded Best Original Composition in the FMR/Pick n Pay Travel awards.

He pursued a music degree at the UCT College of Music, but left after two years. "The musicians I admired ... sat in a certain stream in terms of their sound, compared to what the college taught. As I got older, more curious, I ... realised I naturally took to the sounds of Abdullah because that's who I am in terms of ancestral and cultural lineage. I realised I needed to discover that part of myself."

Last July, Shepherd made his way to Zim Ngqawana's Zimology Institute on the outskirts of Joburg.

"Instead of formal music teaching, I've had more philosophical spiritual teachers like Zim and Abdullah. It's more effective, because it prepares you in terms of understanding before you approach the instrument.

The instrument, in the end, is only mechanical, it's not really the thing. The thing is understanding the music."

Shepherd spent three months at Zimology, an unconventional learning space where young musos can refine their conceptual ideas under the guidance of Ngqawana.

"We never sat and played scales together. We'd sit and ... talk for hours. Zim is one of the most beautiful people I've ever met."

On his return to Cape Town, Shepherd recorded his debut album, its first track titled Zimology.

His compositions are improvised approaches built on a local sound, rich in Cape traditions. While the album is mostly instrumental, he sings an adaptation of the Afrikaans volksliedjie, Die Maan Skyn so Helder.

"I remember hearing that song as a child and I've always liked the melody. When I practise I always find myself singing it. It's a slave prison song, I think Abdullah explained that to me," he says nonchalantly.

A track that refers to Hanover Park in the Cape Flats was inspired by an encounter in a charismatic church: "I was really touched by the spirit of those people who were uplifted despite all their struggles."

As for the poetry in his music he says: "It's something I never used to think about. I stumbled upon an old matric exam paper... and I found this poem I wrote on the side. Soon I started experimenting with including poetry into live performance and it became a sort of compositional tool for me."

Audiences were surprised to find Shepherd playing at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival. "I think getting asked to play was a result of the hard work I put in. I've chosen a difficult path, but at least artistically I don't have to compromise."

Shepherd is focusing on new material and taking his fineART project overseas.

"I play with a deep hope that I can get somewhere in terms of my spirit. It's a lot easier to get into flight mode when I'm playing solo and with a band it's different. But the musical and spiritual high is the most beautiful thing to experience."

● See Kyle Shepherd with Buddy Wells, Shane Cooper, Jonno Sweetman, Lwanda Gogwana and Ethan Smith on May 30 at the SABC Auditorium, 209 Beach Road, Sea Point. R80. 8pm. Tel: 072 351 5204.

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