

TIMEZONES - EPISODE 1 TRANSCRIPT

NAIROBI'S NEXT GENERATION MUSIC PRODUCERS AND PERFORMING ARTISTS SPEAK OUT.

In recent years, small-scale studios in Nairobi have begun producing music locally, and some of their output reaches millions of listeners in Kenya, or create buzz and noise in international niche music scenes. Their producers and musicians are turning old hierarchies upside down, often calling for social and political reforms. But they're also facing a lot of resistance.

A podcast by Thomas Burkhalter

The TIMEZONES Podcast Series is co-initiated and co-produced by Norient and the Goethe Institute.

All Episodes: <https://norient.com/timezones>

Artists:

Baby Elephante, Blinky Bill, Boutross, Coco.em, DJ Raph, Hitman Kaht, Kamwangi Njue, Karun, Janice Iche, Jinku, Joseph Kamaru (KMRU), Manch!ld (debe), Moroko Kalahari, MR. LU (XPRSO), MUNYASYA and Wambui Kamiru

Nana Akosua Hanson ([00:08](#)):

Nairobi's next generation music producers and artists speak out.

Manch!ld (debe) ([00:19](#)):

It's a tough place. We're still a developing country. We have a lot of stuff to deal with. But for producers and artists, we work in isolation. Having to work in isolation has its own problems. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of secrecy. To take your own path, you have to be really silent with what you're doing because there're a lot of naysayers. First of all, they'd ask you why? What's over there? What are you going to find over there? And that would make you question your own journey. It takes a lot of courage cause you don't know what you will find. Personally, as an artist, we usually take the roles people don't want to take. Especially the psychological roles. So if you've embraced that role, then it's good to just go on, there's no barrier.

Boutross ([01:35](#)):

So these are the 10 answers why I love music. One, as a kid I used to love the attention. I still do. Yeah. Two, I've always been good with words, since I was young I used to do like public speaking in school my mom used to be so proud of that. And entertainment. I love entertainment. That's number three, I love entertainment, like entertaining people. The other

one is just, I want to get by. There not many opportunities in Kenya that we are provided with. So if you can find something that you're good at, and you can find a way to capitalize on it. That's what I did.

Hitman Kaht [\(02:17\)](#):

In Kenya, there's a lot of pressure from generally all sides. Because culture here, parents are so against music, or people following their passion. Going to school and getting a regular job, that's basically the routine which every parent strives for their children to achieve.

Janice Iche [\(02:54\)](#):

Yeah, I'm going to go straight in and say this is about being a woman. Several times in my life, I have been told that I can't do things, certain things, or should do certain things because I'm a girl. It has been told to me in those words, because you're a girl. Thinking with your own mind, going after your own life. A lot of men in this society want to keep them to themselves or doing what they want women to do, but not what women want to do. Even growing up, you're not even given the chance to explore your choice, you are just told this is what you do. It's just controlling. Men have the privilege of exploring and exercising that choice. So, you also grow up internalizing all these things. It takes a lot to gain these skills that men are taught from such a young age. It's a lot of training yourself now who you want to be. Did I answer your question? I feel like I keep going.

Selasia A. Djameh [\(04:14\)](#):

Can't face the world right now. Can't face the world right.

Kamwangi Njue [\(04:41\)](#):

This is Kenya we are living in. Kenya is a no joke country, corrupt country, bad leadership. It's just messed up. Nairobi has messed me up. Nairobi is a hard place to live in. I don't think we are Christian nation. Kenya is a prostitution nation. The first people who owned houses Nairobi they were sex workers. Nairobi was built, like through prostitution. Yeah. What maybe happens at night in Nairobi you see cops, you see prostitutes, or sex workers, you see, I don't know people like drunkards.

Kacey Moore [\(05:49\)](#):

I'm angry. Oh yes I'm angry. I'm angry. You still asking if I'm angry? Oh yes, I'm angry.

Boutross [\(05:50\)](#):

4:00 am, 4:30 am, that's when I'm usually up. Take my coffee 'cause that's always very important. And then after that, open up my laptop, my headphones, and I'll sit there for three hours to four hours. Sometimes, you just wake up in and it's like you would dreaming this, this melodies in your head.

Baby Elephante [\(06:50\)](#):

Coming from a poor background, maybe coming from the slums, thing is, first of all, if you're the smartest kid in the family, everyone puts their hope on you. So you're not really working only for yourself. You're working for your mom, you're working for your brothers, you're working for your sisters. It's not an easy thing. And especially if you're talented; there is more

that is put on you. You can't say no to it. And you also can't say yes to it. Always walking on a tight rope.

MUNYASYA (07:47):

The thing with the world right now, there's a lot of pressure when it comes to the male side. The male gender, really, really a lot of pressure that is seldom being spoken about. People expect you to be this person, and they give you qualities they expect you to have. But it's difficult to live in a place where people expect 100% from you and you're just human. There's one that I really get a lot: You don't have to show emotion. You have to be tough. You have to be the rock even when you really aren't able to be the rock. You have to be the person to make the decisions. Basically everything in life relies on you. And you're just one human being. You can only take so much.

Boutross (09:04):

I think the best word you can use is frustrating. You can be book smart. You can be street smart. Most kids are book smart; then you find a kid cannot even afford an exercise book. I've grown up with like a couple of them. I've seen where they've ended up. Even from my childhood, we have I think three friends who just remained. Most of them were super smart but, after you finish high school, that's it. Most of them died because of violence. Some of them are still in prison. Opportunity is not for everyone. People decide to do other things because of pressure, maybe there in a vulnerable position. Because if your mom can't afford to or your dad can't afford to pay for you university or get you an apartment or even food... I'm pretty sure even in your right mind... Most of the guys they sort for violence which is stealing or anything so it's always just frustrating. It's really frustrating and inequality in Kenya is just super absurd.

Coco.em (10:38):

An artist is a very sensitive type of human being. You can mess with a person like this and have them completely depressed, suicidal, wanting to end everything in their lives. It's all about dominance, control, power. This industry has potential to make money. So a lot of people don't really care about the women that they're working with. That's why they feel like they can take advantage of them like this.

Moroko Kalahari (11:33):

Other artists I know they died from depression from drinking. Everybody's depressed even me I'm depressed right now. Everybody's depressed.

Janice Iche (12:24):

Not in your way. Not in your way. From the beginning of trying to make a career for myself in Nairobi. There have been people, men specifically, holding me back. They were not releasing my music, saying it wasn't good enough. Not in your way. Not in your way. Not in your way. As a producer you own a studio, and you are a man already. It's people coming to you. And they [the producer] mostly feel like they can control what comes out of that studio after people have come in. But it's not about that. It's not about controlling what comes out of your studio. It's about making sure that each individual artist who comes into the studio leaves doing great things, and in their own ways, not in your way. Not in your way. Not in your way.

MUNYASYA (14:32):

A normal day for me is waking up at 4:00 am to come to school, because I have to be at the bus stop at 5:30. And take a two hour bus trip from Thika, a town away from where I study, at University of Nairobi. Get to school I have an hour and a half before class. Where I'm online searching anything really of interest, or listening to music. Sound is more than a canvas. Sound for me is like how energy is. Sound is one of the elements that make us exist. Because sound is made of vibrations. And everything on this universe has vibration, whether it's dead or alive it still has vibration. So I feel like sound is part of our existence Then get to class maybe one class or two classes. Then in the evening, if there is a free event in town, an artistic free event, I'll pop in for some time. Then head back home, and the day goes the same way again, again and again.

MUNYASYA (16:06):

The whole point of life is experiencing life. Just going through whatever comes your way. If you are going through something dark, go through it, it's part of life. If you're going through a happy phase in life, go through it, it's part of life. If you're going through a very slow phase in life, nothing has happening. Nothing is coming through. Nothing's going bad or good. Just go through it, that's life. I feel like that's the reason why we are on earth, it's to go through life and experience it. There is a reason why we'll spend 70 years on earth and not two years on earth. Because those extra 68 years were meant to be experienced. Otherwise you just die when you are born, immediately your body just died. As long as I experience life, I'm okay. I have no problem with where I am right now.

Blinky Bill (17:25):

Hey, hey Blinky Bill, you'll never find him standing still. Life is pretty boring till you've met Blinky Bill. This is a fucked up society. But there's examples of artists who are doing well. And when I see Kenyans who are exceptional, they're really exceptional by any standard. That keeps me motivated that there's people who've not lost complete faith.

DJ Raph (18:22):

I think I always liked the sound of music more than the music of music. I think about things maybe too much. My productions may work and even what I see in the future, all of it, I think I would call it serious. I think I'm a fun person but my work I don't approach it from a fun point of view. We launched this in November last year. It's an audio archive of the soundscapes of Nairobi. You can access it at soundofnairobi.net. You can listen to recordings we've been taking of the sounds of different parts of Nairobi at different times. Hopefully, 20 years down the road, you can trace Nairobi's history and changes and so on just by listening to an audio archive, but part of the work is to provide sounds for people to use in their own productions. We want to represent the experience of being an Nairobiian now, and maybe in the future.

Wambui Kamiru (20:04):

Sound is important. Sound is important for me as an artist because I actually use quite a bit of sound to tell me where I am in the day, markers of sound. So we have the roosters that crow in the morning. We have particular birds that chirp at particular times of the day, there's a bird at 6:00 am, which you hear between 5:45 and 6:00 am. you know, if you hear those birds it's time to wake up. There's also a night bird that chirps at 6:00 pm as well, that tells you that the day has ended. I think sound in the past, at least here in Kenya, has been used as a way of

transmitting history, learning, culture, because we tended to be a very oral-based culture when it came to the transmission of knowledge. Very little was actually written down.

Blinky Bill (21:14):

I want to make something different. By just being myself. I've been able to tour the world, I've been able to take care of my family. I've been able to be in rooms where great conversation and great music is being made. If I was a chef, if this is a meal I've made today, you guys will eat it. If you don't like it. There's other chefs you could go to him but if you're tuning into my wavelength, this is what I have for today.

Joseph Kamaru (22:15):

It's Kamaru, Joseph Kamaru, KMRU, in my workspace, my studio. My safe space in Rongai, 2:36pm on the 24th of February, in Nairobi. This is my space, I'm usually just here. I wake up and come to my desk. Yeah. A typical day, maybe on a Tuesday, first thing, I usually check my mails. I'm a very maily person and I clear all the mails I have to finish by morning when I wake up. And from there, I just like get to the order of the day, if I'm working on projects or if I'm out in the field recording something.

Joseph Kamaru (23:24):

Yeah. This is my space. I'm usually just here, I wake up and come to my desk. I don't sort of picture it as a job where I perform, I get money. It's more of expressing what I'm feeling and being authentic and being honest with myself. And I feel that it's one of the really important factors that people, musicians or all creatives just to be honest, as they express themselves. It's a struggle to try and be authentic. This is me and this is what I'm going to showcase to you. Live a life of the music. Living in this bedroom and traveling and a festival books me just by writing them an email and showcasing my work is really motivating to people that, yeah, you can push and do your stuff and get bookings and get paid. Yeah, live a life of the music.

Boutross (24:47):

Book smart. Street smart. Book smart. You can be street smart, you can be book smart.

Munyasya (24:59):

When you are going through something dark. Just go through it. It's part of life. If you're going through a happy phase in life, go through it. It's part of life.

Boutross (24:59):

Book smart. Street smart. Book smart. You can be street smart. You can be book smart. You can be street smart.

Coco.em (25:07):

There was a group that we had formed two years ago called FEMME ELECTRONIC . I was inducted into FEMME ELECTRONIC through DJ Rachael from Uganda. And we decided to do production workshop in Nairobi. Berklee College, they have a free Ableton producing workshop online. And you can do a couple of classes, make some music with the available software, the free one, the one you use for the trial run. And then through this other artist

Kamaru, I'm sure you've met Kamaru. They put together the proposal, sent it to Ableton and sent them the work we did. And they were so impressed. They gave us free software.

MR. LU (XPRSO) (27:05):

'Cause you can't change the scene on your own. It has to come from a community. And that's also what you're trying to push it the Ableton workshops. There's only three African countries that have these workshops going on officially. Nairobi is part of the list now. There is South Africa and Nigeria. So even in terms of music, when people look at Africa, that's kind of how they rank. So I mean, we just pretty much decided to come to this thing, because we felt there's people who wanted to get their way around like Ableton. And it was mainly just a platform for networking and sharing knowledge. We thought it would suit the people here.

Joseph Kamaru (28:03):

We just had a house and a living room, and two pairs of speakers and a screen where we invite people and just talk and share ideas, which we have, to write compositions which can speak louder.

Karun (28:33):

We have to work with what we have. Knowing that the world is your oyster. Knowing that there's huge budgets on the other side of the ocean, right. So that's the biggest challenge being in Kenya. Staying inspired and not feeling jaded. And then not feeling like oh poor me, I don't have the budget. I don't have the record labels or whatever. Whatever. Oh poor me I don't the budget. I don't have the record labels. Whatever. I'm trying to put that away. I'm trying to make art, that's the aim. It's not easy, but yeah.

Jinku (30:00):

Yeah, this is new Nairobi. And it's a new age we're taking back the shackles from the gatekeepers, and we now care about community and the culture and progression. We are the new generation, we care about the country, we care about the scene and we are going to help each other grow. And you know how people say new Africa and all those things.

MR. LU (XPRSO) (30:36):

I feel like artist can bring change to a society. Someone said artists are like God's messengers. So there's this thing inside you as an artist, sometimes it's like a sixth sense. It's connected to your greater goal. So I feel like every artist should listen to that little voice inside them as well that tells them, okay, do that. So be cautious of this, or just whatever the voice tells you. Sometimes it's good to listen, because that voice is the voice of change.

Nana Akosua Hanson (31:31):

Nairobi's next generation music producers and artists speak out. Directed by Thomas Burkhalter. Co-produced by Norient and Goethe-Institute. Featuring-

MR. LU (XPRSO) (31:50):

Hi, my name is Mr. Lu. And I've been spending most of the time in pandemic creating and learning new things. If not hanging with my cat.

Jinku (31:59):

Hey, this is Jinku from Nairobi, Kenya, and I have been spending my time in this pandemic, creating music. I think it's also given me a lot of time to perfect my craft and that's what I have been doing.

Baby Elephante (32:15):

Hey, I'm Baby Elephante. The pandemic is boring for me. And for Kenya.

Janice Iche (32:22):

My name is Janice Iche and this lockdown period for me has been about patience, and imagining and strategizing new ways of being in this world.

Boutross (32:32):

Hi, I'm Boutross and I spend my time with my brothers in my studio.

Wambui Kamiru (32:39):

Hi, my name is Wambui Kamiru Collymore. I'm an artist from Kenya and I'm spending my lockdown writing a book about Mau Mau and Kenyan history.

Manch!ld (debe) (32:46):

I am Manch!ld. I spend my time during lockdown waiting.

MUNYASYA (32:53):

My name is MUNYASYA. I spend my day during this Corona period making music.

Kamwangi Njue (33:01):

I am Kamwangi Njue. I spend my time during lockdown with music, poetry, my wife and kid.

Hitman Kaht (33:11):

Hitman Kaht. And I'm dealing with the pandemic by social distancing and wearing protective masks.

Karun (33:20):

Hi, I'm Karun and I spend my time during lockdown with good music and good people. Love from Kenya.

DJ Raph (33:26):

This is DJ Raph from Nairobi, Kenya. And the pandemic for me has been a time to reflect; think about the future of humanity, our place in the history of the earth.

Coco.em (33:37):

Hi, I'm Coco.em from Nairobi, Kenya. During this pandemic, I've had a lot of time to reflect on myself and to shift focus from the work that pushes me to the people who are closest and

dearest to me, as well as to my immediate community. It has been a financially tough time, but a necessary break from the non-stop hectic work lifestyle.

Joseph Kamaru ([34:08](#)):

I don't know how many weeks have been in isolation. I stopped counting but it's from March, 16th since I came back from Montreal.