



Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa (Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology)

Gavin Steingo

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In mid-1990s South Africa, apartheid ended, Nelson Mandela was elected president, and the country's urban black youth developed *kwaito*—a form of electronic music (redolent of North American house) that came to represent the post-struggle generation. In this book, Gavin Steingo examines kwaito as it has developed alongside the democratization of South Africa over the past two decades. Tracking the fall of South African hope into the disenchantment that often characterizes the outlook of its youth today—who face high unemployment, extreme inequality, and widespread crime—Steingo looks to kwaito as a powerful tool that paradoxically engages South Africa's crucial social and political problems by, in fact, seeming to ignore them.

Politicians and cultural critics have long criticized kwaito for failing to provide any meaningful contribution to a society that desperately needs direction. As Steingo shows, however, these criticisms are built on problematic assumptions about the political function of music. Interacting with kwaito artists and fans, he shows that youth aren't escaping their social condition through kwaito but rather using it to expand their sensory realities and generate new possibilities. Resisting the truism that “music is always political,” Steingo elucidates a music that thrives on its radically ambiguous relationship with politics, power, and the state.

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