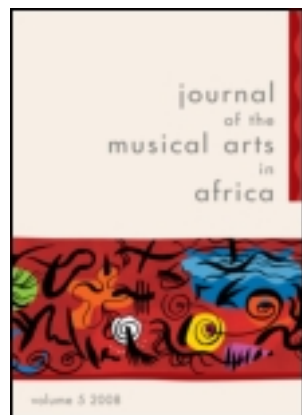


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### A Review of "Fine Art"

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Shepherd, Kyle (2008). *Fine Art*. One compact disc and booklet. Piano: Kyle Shepherd; tenor saxophone: Buddy Wells; bass: Dylan Tabisher; drums: Claude Cozens. <[www.kalahari.net](http://www.kalahari.net)>. <<http://www.kyleshepherd.co.za/>>. ZAR128.95

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There would seem to be a definite feeling in the air, that almost-mystical aura that marks the arrival of an artist. (Keepnews 1959)

Orrin Keepnews's remark about Bill Evans – in his liner notes to the pianist's *Portrait in Jazz* album – translates readily to local jazz prodigy Kyle Shepherd. Born in 1987, the Cape Town pianist has already performed at such prestigious local events as the Joy of Jazz Festival in Johannesburg, and the Cape Town International Jazz Festival. His international dates include concerts at the Århus and Riverboat Jazz Festivals in Denmark, the Bird's Eye jazz club in Basel, Theater Bellevue in Amsterdam, Festival Les Temps Chauds in France, and the Genting International Jazz Festival in Malaysia.

Shepherd's 'proudly Capetonian' jazz sound has captured the imagination of local critics. The *Mail and Guardian's* Miles Keylock admires Shepherd's 'idiosyncratically imaginative jazz vision' <Keylock 2009>, while André Manuel of the *Cape Times* praises the composer/multi-instrumentalist's 'delicate and respectful approach to an old sound' (Manuel 2009:6). For Manuel, Shepherd's debut CD, *Fine Art* – which was recorded when he was just 21 years old – is 'packed with delicate intensity, both wide open and

sparse, allowing the emotion to breathe through' (Manuel 2009:6). His 'jagged edges and questioning dissonances' remind Gwen Ansell (2009:13) of the young Abdullah Ibrahim, while fellow veteran jazz critic Don Albert hears in the album a timely reminder of an almost forgotten jazz era and ethos (Albert 2009:69).

As a set of performances, *Fine Art* is practically flawless, and the album's very warm reception is easy to understand. Shepherd is a fine pianist with a warm and earthy sound that is at once powerful and gentle. His sense of groove is deep and infectious, and throughout the album he locks in seamlessly with bassist Dylan Tabisher and drummer Claude Cozens. Collectively, the young trio spontaneously orchestrates grooves richly coloured with myriad details that ebb and flow so organically that the music always breathes naturally and never feels over-busy.

Along with his deep rhythmic intelligence, Shepherd brings a finely honed sense of harmony to the recording. Although he largely eschews the chromatic extensions and cluster chords that are almost obligatory in post-bebop jazz in favour of the churchier primary chords of *marabi* and Cape jazz, Shepherd always maintains harmonic interest through his canny and subtle approach to chord

voicing. His harmonic playing has a sophisticated simplicity that recalls the mastery of veterans such as Keith Jarrett and Abdullah Ibrahim, and this is especially remarkable for a self-taught player who – at the time of recording – would have been playing the piano for just six years.

Comping is another difficult art that takes lesser talents a long time to master and here again Shepherd comes up tops. Throughout the album he provides the perfect backdrop to Buddy Wells's deft bebop-tinged lines by dropping chords that are always exactly right in their voicing, texture, dynamics and rhythmic placement.

Although predominantly a pianist, Shepherd is also a fine alto saxophonist. On 'Die goema' his contributions on alto create a delightfully unstable texture that veers between counterpoint and heterophony as he plays with and against Wells's tenor melody. On the evocative 'Die maan skyn so helder' his alto playing dialogues poignantly with his plaintive singing.

But despite its many strengths, I am unable to find *Fine Art* a particularly engaging album because – for me at least – Shepherd's compositions are unoriginal and derivative. To be fair, Shepherd makes it clear that his music 'is a direct representation of [his] traditions and the lineage of artists that came before [him]' (Shepherd 2010), but quite often the grooves and contours of his tunes recall too closely pieces by Abdullah Ibrahim, Basil Coetzee and Marcus Wyatt. For me – and others familiar with South African jazz may feel the same – Shepherd strays too close to the line that divides homage from mimicry. By the same token, this makes

his work a fine and beautifully recorded introduction to Cape jazz for newcomers to the sound.

I also find the compositions melodically and formally limited. The opening track 'Zimology', for example, is built around 23 repetitions of a single melodic phrase. 'Dylan goes to church' and 'A.I.' involve a similar lack of melodic variation, as do 'Strandloper' and 'The spirit of Hanover Park'. Because of the skills of the performers, there is effective textural development, but beyond that the absence of a second melodic idea produces a stubborn stasis that prohibits other kinds of development, and limits the improvisers' options. The result is music that has surface interest, but ultimately lacks dramatic and narrative depth.

That said, perhaps my academic location leaves me overly hung up on notions of development and originality. Dictionary definitions notwithstanding, perhaps authenticity *is* – as Zim Ngqwana asserts in the album liner notes – another word for originality. And indeed, as a style study and an exercise in revivifying a lost aesthetic, *Fine Art* is an outstanding success. It is not feasible to try and cram too many different things into a single project and in future work I look forward to hearing other facets of Kyle Shepherd as he turns his formidable talents to other musical projects.

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*Karoo Kitaar Blues* (2007). Directed by Liza Key. Producers: Philip Key and Renaye Kramer. Cast: David Kramer, Koos Lof, Helena Nuwegeld. Distributor: <[www.kalahari.net](http://www.kalahari.net)>, Select Music. <[www.davidkramer.co.za/karoo.htm](http://www.davidkramer.co.za/karoo.htm)> ZAR160.00

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The endeavour of preserving near extinct musical cultures is one fraught with theoretical difficulties. Presenting cultures as 'traditional' or 'near extinct' can, for example, be read as a way of legitimising the power of the ethnographer/ethnomusicologist/musician to represent other cultures. The paradox of preservation poses another problem: as soon as traditional practices are 'discovered', they are contaminated by outside influence. When the object preserved is, in addition, put to commercial use, allegations of exploitation usually follow close behind. None of these concerns, however, entered my mind when watching *Karoo Kitaar Blues*.

*Karoo Kitaar Blues* follows songwriter David Kramer and guitarist Hannes Coetzee on their musical journey through the Karoo in search of the 'ou liedjies' ('old songs') – the musical heritage of the Khoi and the San a people Kramer describes as embodying a 'mixture of indigenous and colonial influences'. In Kramer's trademark vehicle, the Kombi, the team visited

isolated settlements in Namaqualand and the Great Karoo to find a new tin-can violin player to replace the deceased Japie Jaers for the second Baxter Theatre production of *Karoo Kitaar Blues* in 2003. Apart from the full-length 'director's cut', the DVD includes a 54-minute 'short cut', an interview with Kramer and two music videos of sorts demonstrating Coetzee's fascinating teaspoon slide guitar technique and a typical *blikviool* (tin-can violin).

It is the empathy with which the people and the music of the Karoo are portrayed that makes *Karoo Kitaar Blues* something special. The interconnections between the music, the arid landscape and the hardships these people face are subtly captured through some spectacular cinematography and the 'show' rather than 'tell' approach taken by director Liza Key.

The short version uses the same material as the director's cut, but is cut ingeniously by editor, Ronelle Loots, so that it seems to tell the story from another perspective.