

We are left in the dark

On Black musicians in Vienna

By Tonica Hunter

The collective, 'Sounds of Blackness' (SOB), of which I am a founding member, came together in 2015 after we identified an urgent need for Black musicians to be more visible, more involved and more frequently at the helm of the culture surrounding Black music in Vienna, Austria. That is the *why*.

The *how* is that we drew up a manifesto¹, we claimed spaces for the Black community to be welcomed and safe, we worked as much as we could with other Black-owned businesses and initiatives such as Kids of the Diaspora², Black Austrian media outlet Fresh Black Magazine³ and artists among the likes of Amoako Boafo and Kenneth Ize. Our approach was not in any way exclusive: we hosted and welcomed DJs and artists of various backgrounds to play at our events, to set up pop up record stores, to launch their films and products which aligned with our purpose. The focus of SOB was to attempt to question and rebalance a handling of Black music and musicians that had prior come from predominantly white male DJs, club owners and journalists. Most importantly, until today our work is about being unapologetically visible and showing the existence of Blackness and the breadth of that in music.

The work of our collective has indeed questioned the concept of a 'minority' group and the terminology which is used to refer to or portray Black Austrians, or Black people in Austria more broadly. Yet, to what extent is the Black community a *minority* is not the question dealt with here - since the term itself is loaded and misleading when referring to a demographic which has dominated multiple forms of music genres from rock to techno to rap. Rather I use this article to highlight (as we do as SOB) the breadth of musicians in Vienna stemming from the Black community, to explore how Black Austrians in the music industry refer to themselves and their music and to offer some insight into the experiences of Black

1 <https://www.facebook.com/sobvienna/photos/1658337177787937>

2 <https://kidsofthediaspora.com/>

3 <https://www.facebook.com/freshzine/>

musicians in Vienna. I therefore center five such individuals in this article as a result of an online group interview: Ayo Aloba, Dalia Ahmed, Mwita Mataro, Kareem Adetoro and Camillus Konkwo⁴.

'Minority': a double paradox for Black Austrian musicians

Austria has a diverse ethnic heritage dating back to its former Austro-Hungarian days, to the arrival of WW2 African American GIs and a resulting generation children of African American heritage⁵, to the arrival of guestworkers between 1961 and 1973 and their families in the years which followed, to the modern day refugees from Syria to Somalia - to name a few examples. Yet as Fabian Georgi puts it *"Austria still imagines itself to be homogenous, white and German-speaking"*⁶. Austria's understanding and portrayal of itself is therefore problematic given the diversity of its citizens as well as those who live, work and contribute to Austrian society, especially in Vienna where according to figures from 2019, 45,3% of the city's population is of migrant background⁷.

Austria's Black community is estimated to be around 40,000 people but being Black is often seen as incongruous with being Austrian⁸ since Black Austrians (and other Austrians of mixed ethnic heritage) are often still perceived by a white majority as outsiders and suffer discrimination either extremely evidently in cases of racial profiling or police brutality⁹ but

4 **Ayotheartist** (www.instagram.com/ayotheartist) - Sampler and sample-based producer, the terms 'content creator' (to be broad and in his own words) encompasses his work as visuals produce and as an artist.

Cam Rose (www.instagram.com/camillusrose) creative/producer(singing) - contemporary, rnb - produces everything from house to dancehall and RnB

Kareem (www.instagram.com/kareemdt) artist - working with a producer, songwriting, performative also (dance) - sing rnb, trap soul

Dalia Ahmed (www.instagram.com/daliawest) radio show host, producer, music editor and DJ

Mwita Mataro (www.instagram.com/panda_d_mwita/ & www.instagram.com/atpavillon_official) bandmember: singer, songwriter, project manager

5 There was an exhibition and study conducted on this in 2016: *SchwarzÖsterreich: Die Kinder afroamerikanischer Besatzungssoldaten*. Special Exhibit. Volkskundemuseum (The Austrian Museum for Folk Life and Folk Art), Vienna, Austria (21 April -28 August 2016) (Book: Niko Wahl, Philipp Rohrbach, and Tal Adler, eds. *Die Kinder afroamerikanischer Besatzungssoldaten*, Exhibition Catalog. Vienna, ISBN 978-3-85409-802-7

6 **Georgi, Fabian. (2005): Nation-state Building Processes and Cultural Diversity ; Jochen Blaschke (ed.), Berlin, 2005 . - S. 27. Print. (p.51)**

7 <https://www.wien.gv.at/menschen/integration/pdf/daten-fakten-migrantinnen.pdf>

8 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/04/12/lifting-the-veil-on-afro-austrians/>

9 https://assets.zara.or.at/download/pdf/ZARA-Rassismus_Report_2019_EN.pdf

also in varying levels of daily microaggressions¹⁰. The double paradox of the term ‘minority’ when referring to the Black population here lies firstly in the fact that Austria’s diverse population is not separate to what it considers ‘Austrian’, it is made up of it. The second paradox is that Black music has been present in Austria’s contemporary history in ways that cover many genres and have a large influence on what is listened to and played, especially in (but not limited to) popular music.

On labels and genre

‘What is meant by Black music? Music that Black people make?’ Kareem

Kareem’s question (and answer, if you will) summarises the discussion on the topic of genre quite well. The demarcation ‘Black music’ is both limiting and too broad but was raised often by the interviewees:

‘I remember there was a whole section for ‘Black music’ in the charts growing up (Germany charts in)’ Camillus

‘Virgin record store had a section for ‘Black music’’ Ayo

‘There was a section for ‘Black music’ [in Bravo Magazine]’ Kareem

Some felt that these limitations lay within a denial of the roots of the music:

‘I feel like all pop music is black music, there’s no popular genre of music that isn’t [historically] Black. Even rock music is Black music - they all have their roots’. Dalia

Genre provided a good starting point to understand other topics raised around ‘what is Black and what is not’ in relation to music but also language, politics and representation.

Politics

This summer, following the murder of George Floyd in the USA, approximately 50,000 protesters marched for the Black Lives Matter demonstration in Vienna - marking a turning point in Black history in Austria. There was an increased calling out of racism and police brutality both now and in regards to Austria’s past as well as the emergence of new collectives¹¹ against discrimination.

¹⁰ <https://www.thelocal.at/20140821/every-second-black-person-in-austria-harassed>

¹¹ Specifically founded in 2020: Black Movement Austria, Black Lives Matter Austria, Black Youth Austria, Schwarze Geschwister but also with joined support from previously existing initiatives such as Schwarze Frauen Community, ADOE, Afro Rainbow Austria, JAAPO and many others.

In many ways this was a positive period due to a concentrated effort to acknowledge racism in Austria. In others, it meant an added strain to an already overwhelmed community. Many reported being inundated with media requests for public TV and radio appearances or panels due to increased (seemingly short-lived) mainstream interest.

'I got interview requests where I did not have the background to actually talk on these issues'
- Dalia

For the artists I interviewed, it also meant that they were burdened as Black musicians:

'There's a sort of expectation of us as Black artists in Austria to be political and activist' - Mwita

None of the interviewees implied they do not care for politics, nor denied being politically active. As Cam put it: 'my messages in my songs haven't been explicitly about Blackness'; it is enough that Black artists are able to exist solely as artists and as human beings.

Language and image

I also asked about the language they perform in, referring to a German-language afrobeats track by Kareem which I had played on OE1¹². Kareem has switched between English and German in his music over the years. He mentioned an experience where he once presented his work to a major label. The feedback he got was to 'make [his music] more cool, make it more hip-hop'. It is worth noting here that hip-hop is not the genre of music Kareem makes. He was also told to 'put a few more curse words, make it more rough' language-wise.

'It gave me a hard time because most of these people have a certain image of a Black artist; they expected me to have this hard act and attitude' Kareem

This speaks to a gendered stereotype of Black (passing cis) men in which they must adhere to a rough, gangster 'hip-hop' type. It is not only what was expected of Kareem but also what was desired by the label and the industry.

Representation

Some felt there is pressure on them to highlight other Black artists and - even though they felt it important- it was an *expectation*. This tasks Black musicians or those working within

¹² part of a special on BLM in and in order to highlight Black Austrian musicians <https://oe1.orf.at/programm/20200912/611777/BLK-Diagonal-in-Schwarz>

the music industry to be as inclusive as possible when it is also the work (if not even more so than them) of their white counterparts.

'You're always trying to do the best you can and bring other [Black] people with you'. Dalia

On the flip side, the question of *who* is representing Black music (if not Black people) often reproduces an imbalance of those in privileged positions who heavily rely on Black music and musicians:¹³

'People fail to understand that growing up here in the Vienna music scene - when hip hop became a thing in the mid 90s it was still a very exoticised thing and there were quite a few Black DJs playing this music but they never had access to spaces in the way that middle class white Austrian DJs did.' Ayo

Ayo's issue lies in the fact that those who had buying (and playing) power and opportunities did so with genres which stemmed from the Black community but were not always supporting (local) Black musicians.

'We were not making profit from the work [...]. We are used as a source of inspiration but we are not being credited or allowed to monetise that in a more formal way. We are left in the dark.' Ayo

The 'token Black' musician

Some of the interviewees felt seen in relation to their Blackness when it suits a certain agenda i.e when they are called upon to perform a stereotypically 'Black genre'.

'They once wrote on the flyer 'we have a Black bongo player performing tonight' Ayo

Ayo is an all round percussionist as well as electronic music producer. This example serves to highlight how the organisers exoticised him for the purpose of the show.

When the type of music does not align with a constructed stereotype, some of the interviewees reported that they are met with surprise or undesired as performers. Mwita was reminded, upon hearing this experience of Ayo, of the barriers he faced because he played Rock music. Mwita submitted a proposal to play at Vienna's Diversity Ball but it was not successful, he believed, since it did not fit into a genre associated with his Blackness and

¹³ The discussion here is not (and should not be) who can play what music and who cannot. This is rather a discussion of who has the choice, power, privilege, financial means and support, who is remunerated and not and how much, who is a space owner, event manager and curator and who is solely a performer and booked act. More often than not, the Black artist booked or played is not in the position of power and therein lies the more pressing issue in the discussion of 'ownership' of Black culture and in this case, music.

heritage as others saw it. Playing, producing or performing rock music and being Black is not mutually exclusive and more speaks to a lack of understanding of the roots of Black music of which Rock is certainly no exception.

When Black music is actually used and appropriated by non Black persons though, there is not the same questioning of or respect for its true roots. Some of the interviewees referred to Raf Camora - an Austrian rapper who sometimes uses music genres which stem from the Caribbean/Latin America and/or Africa - and who is successful partially as a result of these genres. In many cases, such artists have overshadowed Black artists doing the very same music.

It is clear that it is an enforced 'minority' position which Black Austrians and musicians are subjected too – not one which they refer to or relate to themselves. This is no exception in the cultural sector. In music, they are made a 'minority' by the arbitrary labelling of a section in a record store as 'Black' where in reality the whole store is likely filled with music originating and influenced by Black people. They are not the mainstream artists in Austria in genres which worldwide they are dominant in. They are a shock factor or undesired if they produce or perform outside of those stereotypical genres: a reduction of their identities which their white (Austrian) counterparts do not face. Black Austrian musicians are enforced 'minorities', by being excluded from positions of power and decision making or even winning Austrian music awards. The term 'minority' is more telling of structural and institutional attitudes and actions towards Black people here. In reality, there are a plethora of able, talented Black musicians in Vienna who no longer wish to be left in the dark.

Interviewees

Ayothear (www.instagram.com/ayothear)

Sampler and sample-based producer, the terms 'content creator' (to be broad and in his own words) encompasses his work as visuals produce and as an artist.

CamRose (www.instagram.com/camillusrose)

creative/producer(singing) - contemporary, rnb - produces everything from house to dancehall and RNB

Kareem (www.instagram.com/kareemdt)

artist - working with a producer, songwriting, performative also (dance) - sing rnb, trap soul
soul

Dalia Ahmed (www.instagram.com/daliawest)

radio show host, producer, music editor and DJ

Mwita Matoro (www.instagram.com/panda_d._mwita/ &
www.instagram.com/atpavillon_official)

bandmember: singer, songwriter, project manager

Appendix:

Non exhaustive list of Black musicians in Austria (not including those interviewed above)

[Big John](#)

[Ola Egbowon](#)

[Aminata & the Astronauts](#)

[Topoke](#)

[Gianna Charles](#)

[Niki Glatz](#)

[Emily Soulcat](#)

[Thiago Rosa](#)

[G.rizo](#)

[TJ Hicks](#)

[Derek Roberts](#)

[Jahson the Scientist](#) (currently working on an all black produced and created album - *Black Seeds*)

[Meydo](#)

[Mahir Jamal](#)

[Adaolisa](#)

[Liz Metta](#)

[Marie Spaemann](#)

[Katia Ledoux](#)

[Barbara Ali](#)

[Miriam Adefris](#)

[Dj Bynite](#)

[Esi Boison](#)

[Jerry Divmond](#)

[Legend.Jerry](#)

[Salut](#)

[T-Ser](#)

[Rose May Alaba](#)

[FLO REAL](#)

[Yelvilaa](#)

[Michael Lechner](#)

[Enesi. M](#)

Elijah the Prodigy

[Zionflex](#)

[Miss Weirly](#)

[Hightauer](#)

Black Collectives/Event series:

[Black Massiah](#)

[Sounds of Blackness](#)

[Bad&Boujee](#)

Lollipop

[Lituation events](#)

B(POC) founded and owned record labels:

[Hezekina Pollutina](#)

[Alvozay](#)

[Akashic Records](#)