

IS AI KILLING THE MUSIC INDUSTRY?

SILENCING THE BEAT

When a remix of *Masavu* surfaced online – pairing Azawi with the unmistakable voice of the late Mowzey Radio – Uganda’s music industry was jolted into a new and unsettling reality. The duet was never recorded. The collaboration never happened. What followed was outrage, confusion and a question that refuses to go away: If artificial intelligence can recreate the dead, remix the living, what happens to the soul of music, writes **Kalungi Kabuye**.

The Uganda music industry’s first major encounter with the chaos that Artificial Intelligence (AI) brings came about a year ago, when a supposedly unknown person remixed Azawi’s song *Masavu*. They made it into a duet and added a voice supposedly of the late singer Mowzey Radio.

While it is debatable whether the voice really sounded like Radio’s, the reaction was instant and in some cases brutal.

“Things very quickly went ballistic,” Dennis Asimwe, a pianist and music critic said. “The push back was vicious and ferocious and for that reason we might never know who actually did it. But that was the industry’s reaction to its first encounter with AI.”

Local artiste Omega 256 complained that having their art manipulated without consent is not only

disrespectful, but also undermines the value of their hard work.

“Such people should be held accountable for their actions by suing them,” she said. “You cannot give an artiste a collaboration they did not ask for. People should respect someone’s craft, whether it’s a video or song.”

While the reactions from artistes and musicians were understandably negative, citing the lack of copyright enforcement in Uganda, the public did not seem to mind it. Of the more than 400 comments on the re-mixed *Masavu* video on YouTube, many praised the idea of bringing Mowzey ‘back to life’. Several thanked Azawi for it, not knowing she did not have a hand in it. Bizarrely, some thought it had been recorded before the singer’s death in 2018, while one admitted he had no idea he had died.

That video was an obvious and visible product of what AI can do to music, but there is a lot more, some say much more dangerous, ways.

The ones that one cannot see readily.

For a long time, my go to source for music while I worked was an online jazz station, but then I discovered YouTube videos that would play up to three hours of jazz. I initially thought it was music composed by an artiste, who then recorded and uploaded it on YouTube. I would of course check for the artiste’s name, but I didn’t know any of them. Which seemed strange, but no alarm bells rang.

But then I noticed much of the music, on different channels, sounded awfully similar. On closer checking, some of the videos were clearly labelled ‘AI’

generated’. Many were not, leading to people in the comments to call them out. Some admitted using AI, others just ignored.

What really got my goat were some that claimed to be of legendary artistes, like Sam Cooke or Gladys Knight. While the voices sounded similar, on closer inspection they were not the real thing. Some blatantly used the famous names in large letters, but then the small print would read ‘In the style of...’.

What was happening (and still is) was that AI music generators were used to produce full, high-quality songs with vocals, lyrics and instrumentation from simple text prompts. Most popular platforms include Suno AI, Udio, ElevenLabs Music and AIVA (Artificial Intelligence Virtual Artiste). These generate songs of up to eight minutes long with realistic vocals and instruments in various styles.

There are other platforms that generate background music, especially for content creators who need royalty-free music for their projects. Most popular of these are Soundraw, Beatoven.ai, Boomy and Mubert.

Those platforms are used to create realistic music that can be difficult to differentiate from that created by real artistes. But there are others who go all the way and create completely new artistes.

Last year, the website SoulTracks received submissions from a new R&B singer named Shayla Dunn. They were blown away by her music, and the photos submitted went very well with the sound that brought memories of ‘adult soul’ from the likes of Anita Baker and Regina Belle. So, the website published a glowing review of her song *I’m Different*.

But on closer checks, a few things didn’t add up. First of all, she didn’t have much of a social media presence, which in these days is almost an impossibility. There was no background history or media stories of places she had performed, and the ‘live’ YouTube video was clearly studio-produced.

A producer named Chris Clay, the man behind Dunn’s promotion, eventually admitted that she was completely created by A.I. But he defended his actions, insisting that he had spent a lot of time and money to develop her and her music.

Musician Azawi

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AI PRODUCES MUSIC CHEAPER AND FASTER

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"I never planned to fool anyone," Clay said. "People just want good music, especially this new generation of music streamers and buyers. So, my question is, is it good or bad? And it was good music."

Therein lies the dilemma, if AI can produce good music, should the public care?

IS AI JUST A TOOL?

A Deezer/Ipsos survey found that 97% of people cannot tell the difference between fully AI-generated and human made music.

Xania Monet is an AI-powered R&B singer who made headlines on signing a \$3m deal with independent label Hallwood Media. Her songs had 17m streams in two months, made more than \$50,000, and the single *How Was I Supposed to Know?* reached Billboard's R&B Digital Song sales Top 10.

So, is AI killing music as we know it? Or is it simply a new tool, like the synthesiser or drum machine and musicians will learn to live with it?

"Sometimes the house has to burn down for one to see the clear blue sky," Tshaka Mayanja, an artiste and music promoter, said. "AI is a great thing for music, maybe then people will finally recognise the real value of musicians who put in the time, effort, sacrifice and soul to compose, record and perform music. AI can never replace the soul and human element of music."

Mayanja insists that AI is a tool and there will always be people who misuse their tools.

"There are some very good AI tools for learning songs and practicing," he said. "AI as a tool can be very useful; however, like in all things, misuse akin to cheating is prevalent. The unbridled lust for quick fixes, and social media pressure to trend as fast as possible are the main causes."

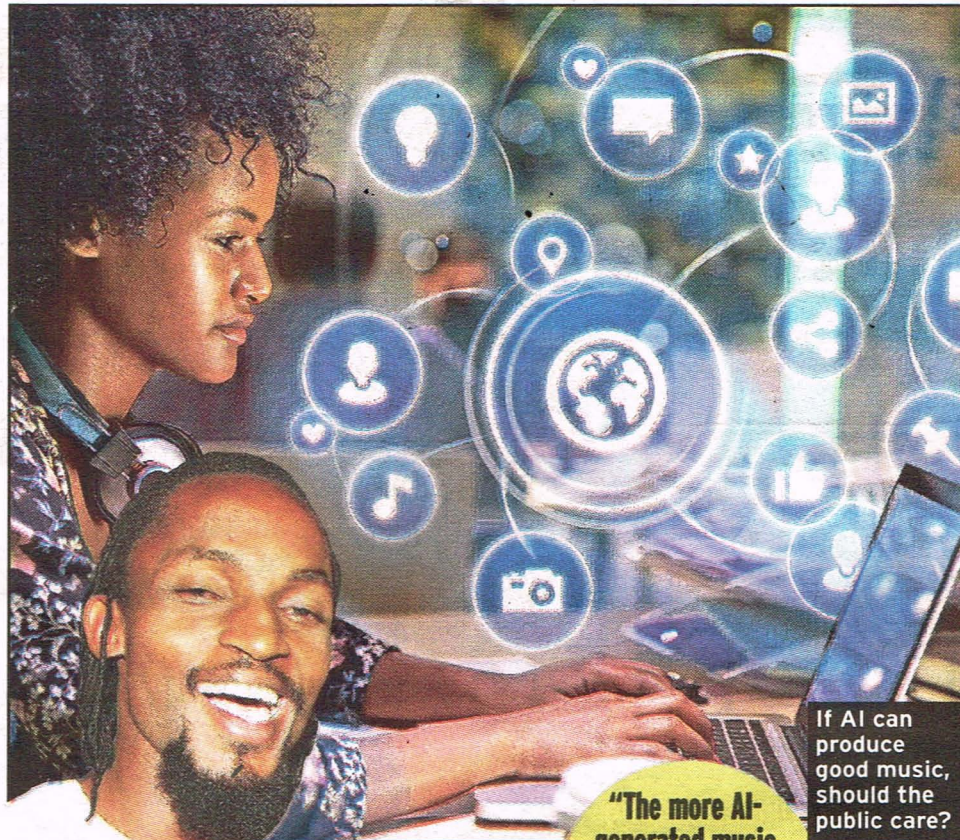
IT IS INEVITABLE

In an hour-long video posted on YouTube, American bassist Adam Neely argues that the increasing use of AI to create music is inevitable.

"AI is both faster and cheaper," he says. "But it means anybody, especially the not very talented, can produce passable music."

Suno offers three plan types, two of which are paid subscriptions and one free. The ProPlan is \$8 (about sh30,000) a month, while Premier is \$24 (about sh85,000) a month. With the PropPlan you can create up to 500 songs a month, while Premier gives you 2,000 songs. In Uganda, it can cost from sh500,000 to sh2m to produce a single song in a studio.

Tshaka tells of a 'very good



If AI can produce good music, should the public care?

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musician' friend of his with experience of over 35 years, a multi-instrumentalist and good songwriter, who's experimenting with using AI on his next album, to cut costs.

Neely points out that what AI platforms do is remix old music, they don't produce anything new. And that the more artistes depend on AI to do the hard work, the more they are 'de-skilling' themselves. The less they use their skills, the more

they will lose them.

There is also the question of ownership, who owns the music created by AI?

Is it that person who did the 'prompts'? Or is it the owners of the music that AI trained on? Owners of Suno admitted to using 'all music files on the Internet' in training their AI. The person who made that re-mix of the *Masavu* video obviously used the likeness of *Mozey's* voice without

permission. But, what if he said it was a 'Mukasa', but sounded just as good? And they obviously trained the AI using *Mowzey's* actual voice.

ARTISTES LIVELIHOODS

The biggest fear is many musicians losing their livelihoods as a result of AI. Session musicians and producers are the ones most likely to be affected, according to studies. A report by the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) predicts music sector workers will lose nearly a quarter of their income to AI over the next four years.

Currently the global AI music market is estimated at around \$6.2b, and is projected to rise to \$38.7b in 10 years. 60% of musicians worldwide now use AI for mastering, composing, or creating artwork; while 74% of music listeners use AI to discover music on the Internet. Where does that leave musicians? Ironically, with AI-generated music taking centre stage, live performances are likely to become more popular as people seek authentic experiences.

"AI has boosted live music," Sam Mugoya, a drummer and banker, said. "Music lovers appreciate live music at another level, as was seen after the COVID-19 lockdown. People did not realise what they were missing till they missed it. The more AI-generated music floods the market, the more people will crave the real thing, in live music."