

NYLON

not for girls.

guy

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THE MOMENT THE VIDEO for his tech house Joy Division tweak "Control" went viral in 2011, South African rapper Spoke Mathambo became hands-down frontrunner for Hippest Human Being on the Planet. Shot in high-res black-and-white, the clip shows the skinny MC standing in a white cleric's suit and early-Spike Lee glasses before the headstones of a Cape Town cemetery—women and children quaking in eye-rolling voodoo ecstasy as he chants processed vocals into a megaphone like a tour guide in some throbbing, death-trip shadowland. Those three minutes limned a world vaster and deeper than any other post-colonial pop star even imagined.

COLD SOWETO

SOUTH AFRICA'S SPOKE MATHAMBO CAN RAP IN THREE LANGUAGES. TAKE THAT, KANYE. BY CHRIS NORRIS. PHOTOGRAPHED BY MAGNUS KLACKENSTAM

Not that Spoke Mathambo makes such claims himself. "I'm a young writer and I'm learning a lot every day, so my stuff isn't super-duper considered," says the surprisingly sunny 26-year-old, born Nthato ("En-TAH-to") Mokgata—who, for the record, likes M.I.A. and his countrymen Die Antwoord just fine. Calling from balmy Cape Town during its summer of early January, Mokgata describes his process as "quite spontaneous. It's throwing up sounds and images and seeing what works. So it's really a teething process the world gets to see." But the radical growth spurt between

100

the assured blend of funk, hip-hop, rock, and Joburg electro displayed on his 2010 debut, *Mshini Wam*, and his wiser and more cohesive new album, *Father Creeper*, is synced to the giddy pace of young Johannesburg—a cultural wormhole that runs somewhere from Civil Rights-era America to a polyglot metropolis of the future.

Standout track "Dog to Bone" kicks off with a jubilant soukous guitar line and the call, "No you don't have to be scared/ Of bullets flying in the air"—the familiar don't-worry-be-happy vibes soon tweaked by singsong chants like "Doom-doom-doom-doom-doom/ Your sons are doomed." "A lot of the new

songs are based on my feelings about Johannesburg as I see it," Mokgata says. "It's the excitement and freedom of being a free country—a beautiful country, man." But one with profoundly dislocated youth who "talk through the nose," were "schooled overseas," and walk among "zombies from the riot days."

Born in 1985 in Soweto, Mokgata grew up in an Apartheid-enforced echo chamber: his movements confined, his family living with constant ambient dread, and his hip-hop intake confined to a TV show's brief stream of videos in 1990. "I was four or five, but my older brother recorded it and I watched it over and over," says Mokgata. When he started rapping at age 10, his MC arsenal included not just a quick wit but fluency in five of his nation's 11 official languages. "My mother's Xhosa, my Dad's Ndebele, I grew up in Johannesburg where they speak a lot of Zulu, but my neighborhood spoke mostly Sotho-Tswana, which is the first one I picked up."

Today he raps mostly in English, sometimes in Zulu, and occasionally in Sotho, but he only recently embraced *kwaito*, the South African genre of house music from his youth, something he chalks up to a universal hang-up: "It's just a kid coming to grips with his hometown after leaving and moving around and always wanting to leave." Mokgata says he always wanted to be a writer and cites novelists Julius Horowitz, Paul Auster, and Ralph Ellison among his favorites. "But going

spent my whole life looking outside for something amazing and extraordinary and my head was somewhere else. Now I see there's a lot of fresh flavor right here."

Along with *Father Creeper*, which is being released by Sub Pop, Mokgata is self-releasing the covers album *Nombolo One*, on which he performs South African classics from the '70s through the '00s with the crack band he assembled to tour and record. And while he currently lives in Sweden—where his wife and collaborator Ana Rab (stage name: Gnucci Banana) is finishing her master's in education—Mokgata's concerns remain resolutely in South Africa; the country's bloody mining trade inspired the new single, "Put Some Red On It" ("Play me some Tupac/ Get in your ride/ Snortin' gun powder/ And drinking cane wine"). The album title comes from childhood TV memories. "It was this silly theme song this character Kalashnikov would sing" Mokgata says. "He'd go [sings] 'Father Creeper is my name/ 'Cause I'm creepin' for your looo-ooooove.'" He laughs. "It's supposed to be this romantic cheesy song but it's really just so creepy."

Yet the man whose new love song includes the line "We'll have our tombstones/ Stuck together" is still surprised when non-South Africans find his work a tad macabre. "I get weirded out when people are like, 'Ooh, that's so scary,'" he says. "I've never had that in my life! 'Ooh, you're scary!'" This he attributes to one more misunderstanding of the culture he long took for granted. "There's such joy and beauty in South Africa, but there's always some darkness, too. That's where *kwaito* comes out of—party music out of darkness. The darkness is always there."



((())) LISTEN UP:



BLONDES
BROOKLYN
MEMBERS: Sam Haar (synths, production) and Zach Steinman (synths, production)

Blondes is the cosmic brotherhood of Sam Haar and Zach Stienman, formed from their mutual appreciation of dreamy synthesizers and a commitment to an improvisational approach to creating music. Unlike many dance music acts, these two thrive in the full-album format: Bubbling melodies are fully realized as arpeggiated synth lines grow over skipping high hats and booming kick drums, creating one complete, club-ready thought. MATT CASH

PLAY THIS: Debut LP, *Blondes*



DARKSIDE
BROOKLYN
MEMBERS: Nicolas Jaar (synths, production, vocals), and Dave Harrington (guitar)

A string of stellar releases on New York's Wolf + Lamb label and the raft of critical acclaim that accompanied his debut album, *Space Is Only Noise*, made the prodigiously talented 22-year-old Nicolas Jaar one of the most exciting artists of 2011. His latest project, *Darkside*, couples him with guitarist Dave Harrington, who