 Frazer Barry

The Evolution of the Rap Revolution: From Peddler's Mouth to Wordsmith

Afrikaans rap is so common today, with millions of downloads on streaming services, competitions and workshops at the Taal Monument, that its first notes are sometimes forgotten. Rap expert and performer **Frazer Barry** shines a spotlight on Cape traders who not only peddled fruit and vegetables, but also helped plant this music's seeds.

I was a six-year-old in 1980, growing up in a multicultural home during apartheid. Music and culture were always present, despite discrimination. My ancestry — Scottish, Khoi, Southeast Asian and European — prepared me to naturally absorb Afrikaans and its various influences.

Ironically, modern Afrikaans rap (rymklets), a product of resistance and identity, found its first seed in the presence of English, the colonial language of oppression. American rap music, especially the Sugarhill Gang's Rappers Delight in 1980, sparked a global youth culture. Rap was also influenced by figures such as Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets — names that sometimes drew their inspiration from Africa, specifically from the work of the Tswana poet Keorapetse Kgositsile.

Here in South Africa, however, rap did not come only from America. Our own soil provided the breeding ground. Cape fruit peddlers of the 1800s used creative rhyme to present their products — a tradition considered an early form of rap. Rhyme schemes have been passed down from generation to generation, documented by Adam Small in his poem *Oppie Parare*:
"Please mêrim
kamaan smile
kyk net
ons tentjies is vol happiness gapaail!

ag hoe lyk die mêrim dan so suur
foei
is die lewe dan asyn
en waar koep die mêrim dit
lyk's nogal boenop duur..."

Examples of such rhymes illustrate how creativity, humour and language play flourished in the vernacular. These rhyme schemes established a natural flair for Afrikaans lyrics among young people, long before the formal emergence of Afrikaans rap. Here is another example that has been passed down from generation to generation. As with most folk music, the creator of the material cannot be confirmed, and thus it becomes part of the public domain.

"Ons hettie lekkerste vrugte
Hulle's onwettig soet
die brightest colours wat jou oege groet

Een skyfie oppie merrim se lyfie
vrugte innie huis
hou die liefde tuis
Vat 'n kassie saam en maak jou buurman skaam
hiersie naartjie
sonnerie broek ennie baadjie

Kam’ie hare ’n paadjie
en luister darem vir Archie
hy’s sonner pitte
goed virrie litte...”

The peddlers are not actually recognised as rappers, but no one can deny that that creative sales language had a subconscious impact on the youth of the time. We all got to know those rhyme schemes and were absolutely crazy about them, but little did we know that those first seeds would later germinate and help us in our practice, participation and acceptance of Afrikaans rap.

Apart from the peddlers' wonderful rhymes echoing loudly in the Cape suburbs, it also played out in the rural towns of the Western Cape. As children in the 1980s, it was almost certainly the quickest way to be exposed to a type of poetry that was fun, musical and highly creative. And something you could participate in instantly. It was rap in action, and the children of the entire neighbourhood participated in it. Everywhere, the headspace and susceptibility to Afrikaans rap were ready for the next chapters that would follow.

Work along, sing along
Apart from my first introduction to the peddlers' rhyme chat, one of the other early forms from my ranks reached my ears in that decade. Five of my older cousins ended up in children's homes due to socio-economic circumstances. Here one of my cousins, Mervyn Swartz, co-created the famous Skaroemba song. When he and my other cousins returned every holiday, they would sing this wonderfully catchy rap song.

Mervyn was a great singer, and he told me how they created the song. "Frazer, in Bonnytoun we had to clean our own rooms, the dining room, the recreation room and the corridors," he says. "It was part of our discipline. The floors had to be shiny! We argued most of the time about who should clean and how we should clean them. So I came up with a suggestion. Guys, why don't we work together?" They decided that they would do the job sing-sing, but that they would do it in a 'pasvang' and free style. In other words, they would make up the songs as they shined the floor.

Because they had no instruments, they relied on the typical ancient war cries. Meaningless cries such as ‘skaroemba’, ‘tittie iyo, arraariyo’ were formed along with other cries that were trumpeted as ‘hey ah’ to form the instrumental part the rhythmic attack.

The magic part
Above and over this rhythmic attack, the other creative part took place. The magic part. The moment when the words are made up right then and there without thinking too much about it, to the beat of the rags and knees moving rhythmically across the floor. The rule was that you couldn't let this wordplay die down. It had to continue. It had to stay alive. It had to portray the story of everyone's life in that orphanage. The pain, the tears, the search and longing for identity. The hardship in the circumstances. Ultimately, the longing to be home with your people again one day.

The 1980s saw American music reach Cape Town harbours despite prohibition. Teenagers fell in love with funk, jazz, rap and electro, and eventually it influenced their own creative expression. In the early 1990s, Prophets of Da City (POC) released the first Afrikaans rap song, Dala Flat. Although they used mainly English, Dala Flat was a breakthrough. It was raw, real and made direct reference to the social realities of coloured communities.

Afrikaans rap was initially unpopular and studios were out of reach for young artists. However, groups such as Brasse Vannie Kaap and artists such as Isaac Mutant and Churchil Naude continued to fight. The first and second generations of rappers worked through ridicule and exclusion to celebrate their language and culture musically.

By the early 2000s, the Afrikaans rap tree had taken root throughout the Cape provinces. In towns such as Paarl and Worcester, artists began to experiment and make recordings, even without formal support or social media.

By 2010, a new wave of artists had emerged without the political baggage of the past. Afrikaans was no longer the enemy — it was a medium for creative freedom. Digital platforms emerged and access to recording equipment improved dramatically. Young artists could record, distribute and build a fan base without major record labels.

Broederbond reimagined

One of the most important movements from this time was the Broederbond movement, led by people like Charlton Davids and Pierre Cloete. They released hundreds of Afrikaans rap songs and music videos, organised concerts (park jams), and changed the landscape of Afrikaans rap beyond recognition.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the new generation of rappers further embraced digital platforms such as TikTok, Facebook and YouTube. The competition intensified, but also promoted creativity and entrepreneurial thinking. The 'likes' and 'followers' were the new measures of success.

For the older generation, the rapid changes brought some concern: the lyrical depth that once played a central role is sometimes exchanged for more superficial content. Yet this is the natural evolution of any art form — each generation rediscovers it in its own way.

Where Afrikaans rap once leaned heavily on American influences, there is now a proud, unique identity. Afrikaans rappers are building their own styles, their own communities, their own opportunities. The genre's demographics have also expanded from the Cape to Pretoria, even Namibia. Afrikaans rap does not discriminate — whether you are white, black or brown, you can be part of the movement.

Today, Afrikaans rap is used in films, telenovelas such as *Arendsvlei*, and school curricula. Projects such as Janine Overmeyer's Black Pearl Foundation and Emile YX's *Heal the Hood* use rap as community-building tools. Academic institutions such as Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape recognise it as part of Afrikaans literature.

I am proud. America is no longer the standard. Our children freely listen to Afrikaans rap in their neighbourhoods. Artists are earning income, seizing international opportunities, and building sustainable careers. We have come from a time when Afrikaans was a source of stigma to a time when it is a source of pride and creativity. Afrikaans rap is not just a style of music — it is a living testament to the power of culture, language, and youth spirit.

Let's celebrate the journey — from fruit peddlers' street rhymes to digital platform queens and kings. The Afrikaans rap revolution has begun, and it will not end anytime soon.

• *This translated and abridged article is part of a series celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Afrikaans Language Museum and Monument (ATM) in 2025; the opinions are those of the author. The full article https://taalmuseum.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Geskiedenis-van-Afrikaanse-rymklets-deur-Frazer-Barry-2025.pdf and other articles are at taalmuseum.co.za/artikels-argief. Follow the ATM on taalmuseum.co.za and social media.*