

Kayo Chingonyi: *Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee*

"It was all about tapes, back then" – Darryl McDaniels

Set over the course of several years, *Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee* tells how the writer embraced music culture as a way of getting through his lonely childhood. Having come to England following the death of his father in Zambia when he was six years old, the poem begins as Kayo and his mother once again need to move; from London to Harold Hill, a satellite commuter town in Essex.

Kayo wakes up in their new house still haunted by the presence of its former occupant, an old lady who recently passed away. Twice separated from all he finds familiar, the boy Kayo seeks solace in music, dialling through radio frequencies and stealing his mother's old cassette tapes, recording songs to play over and over again on his Walkman. Then, one day, he finds a mysterious black tape, unmarked, from which emanates a voice he thought he'd never hear again...

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What street address does Kayo move to at the start of the poem?

- (a) 117 Retford Road
- (b) 15 Lower Meadow Road
- (c) 266 Romford Green
- (d) 58 Dorset Avenue

2. Who are Kayo's friends he left behind in London?

- (a) Hannah and George
- (b) Rod and Stewart
- (c) Sasha and Stacey
- (d) Gavin and Tracey

3. Which is NOT a radio station from the poem?

- (a) Majik FM
- (b) West Coast Radio
- (c) Delight 103.0
- (d) Kiss 100

4. Where is the old lady who's house Kayo now lives in buried?

- (a) Pigeon Street
- (b) Crow Lane
- (c) Swan Drive
- (d) Swallow Terrace

5. What brand of cassette tapes did Kayo record his songs on?

- (a) TDK
- (b) Memorex
- (c) Sony
- (d) Maxell

6. What does Kayo use to defeat the anti-recording design of the cassettes?

- (a) Tin foil and gauze
- (b) Duct tape and newspaper
- (c) Cling film and cotton wool
- (d) Sellotape and tissue

7. Who does Kayo secretly listen to in math class?

- (a) Kenny Rogers
- (b) Lucky Dube
- (c) Napier Bones
- (d) Prince

8. Whose voice does Kayo hear on his mother's unmarked black tape?

- (a) Craig David
- (b) Legba
- (c) His father
- (d) James Brown

9. Who 'ruined everything'?

- (a) Vanilla Ice
- (b) Eminem
- (c) Snow
- (d) Kris Kross

10. What is the final word of the poem?

- (a) Brother
- (b) Poet
- (c) Rhyme
- (d) Line

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Kayo create an impression of his loneliness as a child in part one of the poem?
2. Kayo creates a complex impression of the places he has been in his life. What complexities does he suggest about both London and Essex? How does he suggest his mixed or ambiguous feelings towards the places he lived?
3. Kayo's love of music is represented by physical objects such as the radio and his cassette tapes. How does he make these objects stand out so memorably in part two of the poem?
4. In what ways does music become such a crucial part of Kayo's teenage years?
5. Growing up black in a majority-white country is a theme of the poetry collection *Kumukanda*. How does this early poem begin to engage with themes of race and racism in different ways?

Poetry Study: *musical motifs*

“One dark afternoon, I hear those click-and-clack-hi-hats and stop on Majik FM.”

In an interview with Poetry London, Kayo Chingonyi speaks about the importance of music: “Music is the art form that moved me as a child... I can’t help but think through the world using music and my poems are a record of that fixation.” As it has for young people all around the world, music acts as a kind of refuge.

As a teenager, he would collect music recorded from the radio, one of an army of teenage DJs *“hunched over decks set up next to microwaves or, in pride of place, on a good table...”* At this point in his life, music was his only solace, helping stave off the loneliness of being the only black boy in a white-only school, and armouring him against racist bullies. Over time, music becomes more than a simple shield. Kayo’s love of garage, grime, hip-hop, and rap wins him playground popularity. Kids at school pester him to perform the latest lyrics and he imagines himself a rapper: his school lanyard feels like a *“gold chain”* and his cheap shoes *“doeskin loafers.”* To represent this process, Self-Portrait integrates lines from famous rappers such as Nikki S and Nyke (*“Boom like TNT”*) and Craig David (*“sum a dem ah ay sum ah dem ah love dis”*) among others.

As time passes, however, what begins as simple memorization and recitation becomes something more creative. After Kayo internalizes the rhythms and rhyme patterns of the music he recorded off the radio, he begins to conjure his own lyrics: *“k to the a to the y to the o, lyrical G with a badboy flow.”* As he becomes a more confident creator and performer, so Chingonyi weaves more and more musical motifs into his poetry, such as the repetitions and rhyme patterns favoured by rappers. In an interview with the Guardian, Kayo explains: “the most formalist poetry I have been exposed to is rap lyrics. They are hyper-metrical, the rhyme schemes are intricate, and the levels of allusive play in the average rap song is staggering.” This love of music animates and energizes his writing, creating poems that collide the cultures of literature and music explosively together.

Activity

How well do you know the poetic techniques that Chingonyi uses to craft the ‘music’ of his poems? Fill out the following table with definitions and examples from Self-Portrait as a Garage Emcee (and others if you like):

Poetic Technique	Definition	Example
Internal Rhyme		
Half Rhyme (or Slant Rhyme)		
Onomatopoeia		
Alliteration / Consonance		
Assonance		

Important Symbolism: *cassette tapes*

“Lunchtimes in the music room making haphazard recordings onto TDK cassettes, broken tabs Sellotaped...”



Readers of a certain age will instantly relate to the love of tapes that infuses Kayo Chingonyi’s poetry and, even today, music aficionados hold a special place in their hearts for the humble ‘compact cassette’. Invented in 1963 by a Dutch company, the cassette tape played a role in late 20th century culture, helping to ‘democratize’ music by enabling a cheap and accessible way to record, replay, and spread songs in a time before digital technology. Tapes were the core method for underground artists, DIY distributors, and indie bands to release, share, and connect their music to a wider audience. The pocket-sized tape had a unique ability to foster a sense of community, as enthusiasts made their own ‘mixtapes’, traded recordings, and discovered new artists through unofficial networks and basement scenes.

Moreover, for Kayo Chingonyi, who grew up in the era of cassettes, the tape is an important piece of personal memorabilia. His poems celebrate the tactile nature of tapes – their compact size, hands-on requirements, investiture of time and energy – by recreating the tangible connection between himself and his tape collection. He remembers their charming appeal, expressed as though tapes are precious treasure in lines such as *“I’d plunder my mum’s cache of cassettes”*. He lingers on the act of popping a tape into a deck, pressing play, and experiencing the warm, analog sound of magnetic tape. The sound may be flawed, overlaid with static crunches, warped warbles, and the whirring clicks of the moving reels. Nevertheless, readers may experience their own nostalgia for a bygone era of technology that digital media simply cannot replicate.

Analytical Writing Practice

Read this short prose-poem from *Kumukanda* and write an analytical paragraph about the symbolic use of cassette tapes here, or in the wider collection. How does Kayo revere and elevate this humble object?

Guide to Proper Mixtape Assembly

The silence between songs can’t be modulated by anything other than held breath. You have to sit and wait, time the release of the pause button to the last tenth of a second so that the gap between each track is a smooth purr, a TDK or Memorex your masterwork. Don’t talk to me about your MP3 player, how, given the limitless choice, you hardly ever listen to one song for more than two minutes at a time. Do you know about stealing double As from the TV remote so you can listen to last night’s clandestine effort on the walk to school? You say you love music. Have you suffered the loss of a cassette so gnarled by a tape deck’s teeth it refuses to play the beat you’ve come to recognise by sound and not name? Have you carried that theme in your head these years in the faint hope you might know it when it finds you, in a far-flung café, as you stand to pay, frozen, and the barista has to ask if you’re okay?