

Local DJ, producer Mr Thela takes Gqom to South Korea



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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On the back of South African artists Zakes Bantwini, Nomcebo Zikode, and Wouter Kellerman recently winning a Grammy Award, South African talent continues to export music and art globally. Simphiwe Sihawu, 23, popularly known by his stage name, Mr Thela, is set to play in Seoul and Songtan in South Korea this March.

The DJ and producer from Samora Machel, Phillipi, in Cape Town is preparing for his first international gig just months after releasing his first solo project *Tronics Land Series 1* in November 2022.



South Africans were first introduced to Mr Thela through his joint album *Make Cape Town Great Again*, a collaboration he did with entrepreneur and DJ Mshayi who is also the co-owner of Rands Cape Town, which was released in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown. The album became popular with its new sound of Gqom gospel, while keeping it in the Gqom genre which originated in KwaZulu-Natal.

The album's lead track *iParty* dominated airwaves and virtual house parties across the country, and even streaming giant Netflix picked it up for the production of movie *Jiva's* soundtrack.

Make Cape Town Great Again was later certified platinum by the Recording Industry of South Africa (RiSA) and was nominated for The Best Gqom Album at the South African Music Awards (Sama) 2021.

We catch up with Mr Thela ahead of his first international gig...

▀ ***How did you get into DJing?***

The funny thing is that my background is church. I'm a pastor's kid and I played a keyboard at church. So, my love for DJing stems from my love for music. In recent years I developed an interest in exploring a wider range of music. That's when I met a well-known DJ in my area, Soyisele Mdzinwa, popularly known as Ta Koko. He taught me everything I know about DJing and producing.

▀ ***Your stage name is Mr Thela. How and why did you choose this?***

When I started DJing, my stage name was DJ Simpra, which is derived from my name Simpiwe, but then I realised that there are a lot of DJ Simpras around Cape Town and I needed something that would stand out. The name Mr Thela comes from my catchphrase 'thelu mlilo simpra thela baba thela' (loosely translated as add fuel to the fire that is my music). I use the catchphrase in almost all my songs and that's how I decided that my stage name should be Mr Thela.

▀ ***Gqom has taken the music world by storm, but Gqom gospel is a new sound. How would you describe it?***

Gqom originated from KZN, so Cape Town Gqom or Gqom gospel is an infusion of the Gqom sound with church melodies. Gqom mostly focuses on the drum but with Gqom gospel we focus on both the drum and the melodies, adding keyboard and choral vocals.



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▀ ***You're getting ready for your first international gig in South Korea. How did this come about? Where will you be playing?***

The opportunity came to me through a referral. Apparently, there is a guy I once met at a gig or shared a stage with in PSJ (Eastern Cape). Turns out he is a music promoter. He was so impressed by my sound and how I moved the audience that later when he relocated to South Korea and they were looking for an African sound, he put my name forward and they

reached out to my manager. I will be playing at Osan AFB (Songtan Entertainment District) in Songtan City.



■ ***How do you think South Koreans are going to react to your music?***

By the look of things, the people of South Korea are excited about the gig and it seems like I have a lot of supporters that I never knew are based in South Korea or other parts of the world. I've had South Africans living in South Korea reach out to me, much to my surprise. So, I'm hoping they receive me well. I'm going to give them a taste of South Africa and hopefully a memorable performance for all of us.

■ ***Where do you find your inspiration?***

I find my inspiration in some of the big artists in the music industry, looking at where they come from and where they are now - the likes of Black Coffee, Shimza, Kabza The Small, DJ Tira, Oscar Mbo and many more, the list is endless.

■ ***As a Sama-nominated artist. What has this done for your career?***

Wonders! It's a wonderful achievement to have under your name. It has opened doors for me, people I never thought would ever know my name or my work know about me and my music. My music is recognised all over South Africa. I get booked as far as the Eastern Cape.



▣ ***Where to from here?***

The plan is to keep on working harder and reach a greater height - bigger audience - especially internationally. I want to be a Sama award-winning DJ/producer. More music is coming including a collaboration with DJ Tira and Nobantu Vilakazi. *Tronics Land Series 1* will be followed by *Tronics Land Series 2*.

▣ ***Anything else you want to add?***

Yes, I want to send a special thanks to everyone who has supported me since day one, and I promise them nothing but good music. Sending out good vibes to everyone who has a dream or is consumed by a passion. Keep on believing in yourself and your craft.

I've just dropped my latest single titled *iMali* featuring Nobantu Vilakazi.

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