

# Have You Heard George's Podcast (it's a true original)

## Have You Heard George's Podcast

Eight-episode podcast hosted by George Mpanga

Producer: Benbrick/Paul Carter

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## By Hugh Levinson

In the early years of the podcasting revolution, the promise was of openness: an explosion of invention. Potential audio makers were freed by inexpensive technology to innovate, to make whatever they want. The most recent figures I heard (which were a while ago) were that Apple's podcast app was registering 2,000 new feeds a week. A week!

Unsurprisingly, most of them are rubbish - or cater for increasingly narrow interests. More surprising is how little innovation there has been. For me at least, most podcasts are in the imitation game, copying what other podcasts have done. There are few true originals.

Luckily, they do exist. And one of them is George Mpanga, who goes by the stage name of George the Poet. The result is his wildly inventive, occasionally seriously flawed series, *Have You Heard George's Podcast*. It won five times at the British Podcast Awards in 2018 - in both factual AND fiction categories. Something's going on.

Yet what's going on exactly is (refreshingly) hard to describe. Stylistically, the eight-part series is a mash-up: poetry, sketches, interviews, archive, music, performance and sometimes off-mike chat with his producer. It's often difficult to know what's real and what isn't. Or more accurately,

what's recorded spontaneously and what's scripted/acted. There are frequent sudden changes of pace and perspective. George rarely tells you where you are going. He just wants you to come along for the ride.

George takes on big themes - empowering his community, self-belief, crime, drugs, racism, inequality and international politics. But he'll race back and forth between an explanation of the rise of Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine to talking about a favourite music track. It's often disconcerting, but mostly engaging.

The son of Ugandan immigrants, George went to an elite state school in north London before taking a degree at Cambridge - one of a vanishingly small number of black British students there, then and now. He released several music tracks and built up a reputation before he shot to the national consciousness in May 2018. He opened the BBC's coverage of the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, delivering a poem on the nature of love as he roamed sharp-suited through St. George's Chapel at Windsor.

As for the podcast, he lays out his intentions in episode 4, "It's On Us":

*There are a few reasons why I come up with this podcast  
Obviously to drop bars  
But also to remind myself that poverty is not ours  
We're made to think it is - 'cause pain sells -  
That's the nature of the biz  
But our brain cells have to change the way we live  
Do you know how hard that is?  
That's why art matters  
The status quo can be challenged  
With a credible counter-narrative  
I mean, without sounding arrogant  
I reckon that's what we kinda did  
Because obviously man are talented  
We've got careers because we share stories  
That not everybody hears or reads  
And we're getting loads done...  
I don't want to just talk about what's going on now  
I want to visualise what can happen next*

*So I paint a picture of the future  
And then figure out how to get there by taking backwards steps  
so let's walk backwards you and me*

That last phrase - "you and me" - is typical of the podcast, as George turns to address and challenge the listener directly. These twists and turns are what marks the podcast out. This is evident in my favourite of the series: Episode 2: Popcorn. I think it's something of a masterpiece so let me (George-style) take you through the structure.

We begin with George talking to his smart speaker.

*GEORGE: Alexa - have you heard George's podcast?*

*ALEXA: Yes. Have you Heard George's Podcast is the latest project from spoken-word artist George the Poet.*

*GEORGE: Uh, hum, cool*

*ALEXA: I find him attractive and his voice has this kind of..*

*GEORGE: Alexa, stop!*

After this witty intro, George says he'll recall a memory - his mum talking to his nephew, or as he calls him "little man". We hear a child crying as George explains the scene. His nephew's Lego model fell apart and his mother is encouraging the child to rebuild it.

*See, in this situation my mum makes a choice  
Instead of just telling my nephew to stop making noise  
And allowing him to carry on, pissed off and hopeless  
She explains the value of persistence and focus  
She's showing him how to manage his emotions  
And she's teaching him ways of using language in the process - listen.*

We hear more of George's mother encouraging his nephew. Characteristically, it's hard to know whether this is staged or actuality recording - though it sounds to me like the latter.

*See how my mother says he's got a brain for building things  
That's cos she observes him when he's playing with children's things*

*So whenever he's building things, she's noticing the skills it brings  
Out of him from deep down within  
And that's how she's been with all of us  
Very in tune with our strengths and weaknesses  
My mum believed we could overcome anything  
And she went to great lengths to teach us this  
And that kind of sensitive nourishment  
Gives a child a sense of encouragement  
It gave me confidence in my own ability  
That's why I didn't let me environment limit me  
Cos at some point most of us want to leave the hood  
But before you've even formed a plan  
You've absorbed all these norms and values  
And that's why the formative years are a significant period  
But some of my friends: very different experience*

Then we move to a different scene. Club music and a mixture of off-mike voices. What emerges is a story of George as a boy, growing up in the 'hood and hanging out with a friend whose family life was radically different:

*Outside the yard you see friends getting badded up  
Just across the hall you see big cousins bagging up*

We hear women chatting off-mike.

*You go to the kitchen, the fridge is empty  
Instead of cooking someone hits you with a twenty  
So you leave the yard anytime you want  
And go to the nearest place you can buy food from*

The youthful George is impressed by his friend acquiring a £20 note. We hear street noise as he describes going to a sweet shop.

*But you don't seem fazed  
Cos you're on the road for days  
So I follow your lead, I put on a poker face  
Get to the shop now and what do we see*

*Two hood chicks and an alcoholic  
Having an argument but I can't make out the topic*

Again, George emphasises his distance from his friend.

*See even though your home life is hectic  
It's given you steady nerves so I respect it  
You teach me things my parents aren't equipped to  
So coming up in Harlesden with you evolves my perspective  
The downside is you've got too much independence  
Your family don't know what you're doing right now*

George describes envying his friend. While his own home was a haven of calm, his friend's flat was used for "badness". As a music track kicks in, George describes what he didn't know at the time: that his friend's father was a drug smuggler and informer. This affected his friend's sister and then his mother, who worked longer and longer hours. The music rises - a piano figure and long string chords over sound effects of arguing and shouting.

*Now you're spending more time around your sister's latest boyfriend...  
Yeah he's a gangster but you're impressed cos he's cool  
And about this time we're starting secondary school*

There's a montage of news archive about spending cuts in education, cut over the sound of shouting in a classroom. The music - keyboard arpeggios and synthesised chords - fades away. George changes direction.

*Anyway: that's the bit that you've heard before  
And I hate repeating it because first of all  
For my community this is personal  
And that's not the case for everybody furthermore  
But there's another story to be told  
One that often gets ignored*

George argues that there's a wellspring of experience here and that many of these young people have the life experience which could make them rappers or producers. A grime track cuts in hard. George pleads:

*Now to all my listeners who don't like this music  
Please don't forward this bit - it's lit  
Trust me this bit is lit*

George's voice is distorted as he offers to be a "tour guide" for this track from East London group More Fire Crew, recorded almost 20 years ago.

*So how did they create it without backing from a poor community  
Where drug money which should be for student fees  
is usually stored in jewellery  
at a time when this kind of art was regarded as little more than coonery  
If we're talking truthfully?*

George adds that it's also 20 years since the release of the Macpherson Report and its groundbreaking finding of institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police, the London force.

There is a montage of interviews about the report and its significance. George again argues for valuing music from the street over another More Fire track, which fades to silence.

We hear a door knock and a woman with an RP accent.<sup>1</sup> We're abruptly in a sketch or dramatic scene.

*Woman: Hi, hi George*

*George: How you're doing?*

*Woman: Sorry to knock so late. I was actually listening to your podcast*

*George: Oh sweet*

*Woman: Massive fan.*

The woman asks George: "Do you not think that it's slightly unfair to characterise white people as a sort of almost homogenous group that's almost universally oblivious to institutional racism prior to the Macpherson Report?"

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<sup>1</sup> Received Pronunciation: code for 'posh'

We hear the door shut. Another woman - presumably George's flatmate asks: "Who was that? She were cool."

George explains that she's a neighbour and he is not happy with her question. He puts it to his flatmate "as a member of the white community" if the More Fire segment was accusatory towards the white community. They have a mild disagreement, then look for something to eat. George puts on the microwave. The second woman keeps talking but her words are increasingly distant. George addresses the listener directly over the sound of a microwave. George's flatmate continues to speak to George in the background. But she's unheard, off-mike. Music picks up - gentle chords and wordless singing. Then there's the twist which I think makes this episode outstanding. George comes out of the scene and talks directly to the listener.

*This is what it's like when we talk about racism  
My mind's disengaged but you can't tell cos my face isn't  
We just go round and round in circles  
Like the popcorn in the microwave  
Like the next generation about to jump on the liker wave  
I feel you popcorn  
I know what it's like to be stuck in a box  
Surrounded by corn like you're bucking your ops  
Feeling nothing but heat  
That's what it was like coming up on my street  
Course you blow up  
Bound to happen when you're forced to grow up  
You feel the heat so you get it poppin'  
Because there is no second option*

....

*Here's the joke  
After everything you've been through  
They take you in as a light snack, you know like that  
Not even a proper meal  
Like all the pain in the community suddenly disappeared  
Cos a couple of rappers got a deal.*

We hear plates, crunching as George says popcorn is junk food, without nourishment.

*Substance is something this music doesn't lack  
It shouldn't be viewed as just a snack  
This music's like sociological journalism  
And the producer and the consumer's concerns are different  
Imagine the potential if we stopped pushing the historical determinism  
And forced the world to listen*

Then we are back in the scene. "Popcorn's ready!" George says to his female friend. The piano fades over the sound of crunching. The episode concludes with a very long list of credits and shout-outs.

Not every episode speaks as powerfully to me as this one. And I find the argument that making music is a viable solution to youth unemployment unconvincing. Maybe George thinks this too. But it shows George's talent for taking the listener off guard - a stratagem he sometimes achieves by direct address and sometimes by humour. There's a great example of the latter in Episode 4: A Grenfell Story, where George explains the science of diabetes through a series of sketches. Diabetes prevents glucose entering cells, he says.

*Female voice on phone: Hello  
Nervous RP man: Hi, it's Glucose.  
Female voice: Glucose who? We didn't order anything from Glucose...sorry we're not interested.*

George explains that insulin unlocks access to the cell. Then we're on the street - outside a club.

*Doorman: Sorry mate, it's list only  
Glucose: Hey it's Glucose, I've got some energy to deliver  
Doorman: Sorry, you're not on the list mate.  
Glucose: If you call Insulin...*



*Doorman: There is no Insulin around here. You cannot get into this cell without being on the list. Step aside please.*

George goes on to draw a parallel between diabetes and his community - one which frankly I couldn't follow. But that raises a question. Who is the podcast aimed at?

*To some of you I'm just another artist rapping.  
But if my art can change his destination  
would you call that entertainment or education?  
Nowadays before I write I do some better research...  
I fill my art with actual information.  
That way it's more like practical inspiration.  
The listener's a bit more G'd up afterwards.  
And I cover everything from street to fatherhood.  
This information is specifically curated to inspire new belief in my  
community.*

Is he, as he says here, specifically talking to his own community? Or is he, as he says earlier, a "tour guide", presumably for white listeners? That's reflected in his language, which will go from the references to historical determinism and sociological journalism to talking about his bredren and mandem.

*My perspective's quite reflective of my collective's  
respective experience and sensibilities  
But I'm a minority  
either by geography or ethnicity  
The political establishment wasn't built around me  
Even though they won't say this explicitly  
So as I proceed into the higher leagues of this society  
I perceive people like me fading into the distance quietly*

This will make some listeners uneasy. They might want more authenticity or consistency. As a white listener, I'm not bothered: I'm not left with a feeling that George doesn't know what he's talking about, and I can't judge whether the community he mentions so often would find the podcast exploitative or

inauthentic: black lives interpreted for a white audience. If that is a risk, it's certainly one that George is well aware of.

Where I do have reservations is occasionally his presentation of what he calls the truth - notably in his otherwise brilliant episode about the Grenfell Tower fire. It includes the discredited story that a baby was thrown from an upper floor and George asks questions about the official figures of the number of deaths. This taps into a popular and evidence-free conspiracy theory that the authorities are concealing vast numbers of extra deaths - maybe several hundred.

More generally, the series suffers when it's too self-referential, indulgent even. This reaches a climax in the final episode, Sanyu's World. This concerns a Ugandan female character, Sanyu, invented by George. She takes on her own life in George's head and seeks frantically to establish her own story. This becomes repetitive and is made all the worse by Sanyu speaking in a speeded-up Minnie Mouse voice which is close to unlistenable. The episode is a disaster and an unworthy end to the series.

Nevertheless - George the Poet and his producer Benbrick (Paul Carter) have achieved something genuinely groundbreaking. They have demonstrated again that the only rule of creativity is ... that there are no rules.

I urge you to listen.

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## HUGH LEVINSON:

Hugh Levinson is head of BBC Radio Current Affairs where he edits Law in Action, The Bottom Line and The Reith Lectures - working with lecturers including Stephen Hawking, Hilary Mantel and Grayson Perry. He began his career as a BBC Local Radio Trainee around the time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Apart from three years with *The Japan Times* in Tokyo, he has been with the BBC ever since. He has edited major ad hoc series including Intrigue: The Ratline, Partition Voices and Incarnations – a 50-part history of India. Coming up, he is developing a project about the dark side of Las Vegas and The Compass: Chinese Dreams, a World Service series about China's influence on domestic politics around the world. In his spare time he runs, irritates people

with card magic and plays guitar with a deservedly little-known group called The Trouser Band.



*Full disclosure: Have You Heard George's Podcast Series 1, though produced independently, is available on BBC Sounds. Series 2 is being developed in association with BBC Sounds.*