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Making Music: Informal Music Production and Tenderized Performance in Venda, South Africa.

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This paper presents an ethnographic analysis of the popular economy of informal musical production in the Venda region of South Africa. It focuses on the activities surrounding a recording house that specializes in reggae music: the 'Burnin' Shak Studio'. Reliant on second-hand computers, pirated software, borrowed instruments, networks of trust and cycles of debt, musicians and producers in the Burnin' Shak occupy a distinctly peripheral position in South Africa's music industry. Unlike artists in the formal sphere of musical production, who sign deals – mostly for two or three albums – with specific record labels, musicians in the informal sector seek out sponsors – usually young local business men – to fund their recordings with local producers. Marketing and distribution is the sole responsibility of the artist and their sponsor, who often develop a 'patron/client' relationship. And yet whilst their artistic entrepreneurial activity often earns them significant airplay on local radio stations, and associated cultural capital, the financial benefits are slim. Even with a sponsor's backing, most artists cannot afford to produce more than 200 CDs, and sales to the general public are complicated by the constant duplication of their work thorough CD pirating schemes. In order to convert their cultural capital into cash, musicians in the informal sector must compete in the market for performances at government-sponsored shows. These shows are extremely well funded by lucrative tenders from the Department of Arts and Culture, and an hours' performance can pay between R35,000 to R60,000. But this is a double edged sword. To secure a contract with tender holders – or to entertain hopes of regular paid performances – musicians must ensure that their performances do not express anti-government sentiment. As purveyors of a genre renowned for its critical social commentary, reggae musicians are particularly affected by this expectation of self-censorship. Informal musical production in the post apartheid era thus affords musicians little artistic freedom. Rather, *a la* The Frankfurt School, whilst the products of this culture industry may appear to be part of a 'secondary' economy, removed from the spheres of formalized production and control, they are in fact regulated and standardized through the process of tender allocation