

# CATCHING THE BEAT OF SOUTH AFRICA

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*To get to know the beat of a culture, you need to tune in to the rhythms of its music. In Cape Town, jazz is what makes the city tick. Born in the townships during the troubled times of South Africa's history, the music of this port city showcases a blend of Western and African influences, composed of a variety of sounds from around the world. While the jazz scene may be vibrant, it isn't easy to find for parachuting visitors. Many hotspots are hidden from the public eye and some of the best sessions happen informally at musicians' homes.*

On a whirlwind three-day stay in Cape Town, I was on a mission to experience the city beyond the tourist heavyweights of Table Mountain, Victoria & Alfred Waterfront and the admittedly spectacular beaches of Camps Bay and Clifton. A quickie tour of these was good enough but I wanted to dig into the fabric of life as it's lived beyond the city centre and the wealthy suburbs. I wanted to find music in the everyday, detect the rhythms that the streets of Cape Town's townships sway to. With limited time, I couldn't just wander around aimlessly, hoping to unearth something unique. That's where the jazz safari came in. Coffee Beans Tours offer a way to discover the city's jazz secrets while contributing to the local music scene. Their visits with musical storytellers feature an intimate supper in their living rooms, where guests meet their families, listen to their music and hear their stories. To meet the people who are keeping music alive – what an ideal way to catch the city's creative spirit.

It is Saturday night in Gugulethu, a township in the Cape Flats, some 15km outside Cape Town. I'm sitting in the living room of Fezekile Tempzi and his wife Sheila, chatting about music and life in the townships before and after apartheid. Throughout the evening, Blackie, as Fezekile is known to friends, picks up his trumpet at random intervals and treats us to a tune or two. After one of these impromptu performances, Sheila, a powerful presence with a cheeky face, commands us all to the table where a spread with "chicken à la Sheila" and a variety of sides, including pap (South African staple, a porridge made from maize flour), cabbage and sweet potatoes has been laid out. The talking doesn't stop as we chow down on Sheila's home-cooked delights. I find out that Blackie has been playing since 1977, having left school after the Soweto student uprisings of 1976. Largely self-taught, he has toured South Africa and beyond for a couple of decades, since 2000 with his five-piece band called Brotherhood. As we chat, he mentions in passing that a music school just opened down the road earlier that day, where he'll be teaching part-time. It turns out the school was built by the Playing for Change Foundation.

I had heard about Playing for Change a year ago, when a video of a Stand by Me rendition by various musicians around the world went viral online. Described as "a multimedia movement created to inspire, connect, and bring peace to the world through music" which "arose from a common belief that music has the power to break down boundaries and overcome distances between people", this video made such waves around the world that it gave birth to a non-profit foundation which builds music and art schools "in communities that are in need of inspiration and hope". My hosts suggest

we head over to catch the last of the celebrations. The next thing you know, I'm in the backyard of the Playing for Change school, listening to a jam session with a band of local musicians. Half the neighbourhood seems to be there, including hordes of children running around as their parents boogie away.

After saying goodbye to Blackie and Sheila, Michael, my guide, drives us to our next destination – the living room of the legendary Cape jazz cat Mac McKenzie. This master musician – a virtuoso guitar player and Cape Town's composer laureate – lives in Bridgetown, Cape Town's first 'coloured' township that he calls the "frontier township". We are running late, so Mac gives us a hard time, jokingly, with his signature toothless smile, and then introduces us to his girlfriend Renata visiting from Basel. Sitting down with a glass of red wine, Mac's story slowly unfolds together with the evening, as I learn of his strong musical heritage. "I was born into it," reminisces Mac. "In the 1950s and early 1960s, my parents ran open-house jazz parties in our lounge, with a full-on band, dancing and ma's cooking." His father was the great banjo player and carnival leader Mr Mac who kick-started a goema (music of Cape Town's carnival) revolution back in the mid-1950s. Mac's mother, Ma Mac, lives in the house in the front and Mac himself is – to my surprise at a look of this strong youthful man – a grandfather!

Mac, widely known as The Goema Captain, also gives me some historical insight into goema, his "traditional music" that arose as the sound of carnival. Every year on the 2nd of January, for Cape Town Minstrel Carnival, the minstrels march through the streets in colourfully dressed troupes, featuring lots of music, dancing and singing. A mix of Brazil-style Carnaval, with a sound reminiscent of New Orleans, and musical influences that sailed into the port from around the globe, this music is Cape Town's unique signature. The name refers to a wooden barrel-shaped drum (known as a goma), which is played by the revellers. But this event is not just for fun; it's political in nature, marking a movement of the oppressed people who took to the streets and, instead of protesting, showed their resilience by singing and dancing. The custom was started in the mid-19th century by Afrikaans-speaking 'coloured' families from the working class, who were celebrating their one day off per year, when the slave owners released them from labour.

"Goema is the music of the people," Mac explains. I learn that he brought goema back into vogue with his pop quartet The Genuines in the late 1980s and later his band, The Goema Captains of Cape Town. As we're talking, he spontaneously starts playing guitar, and I melt to the sounds of his incredibly soulful songs and skillful strumming. In an evening interspersed with this ear-candy he also tells

me about Cape jazz, which was inspired by the folk songs sung by descendants of former slave communities in the Western Cape, known as the Cape Malay people. This fusion of African music and jazz was born in the 1970s and flourished during the late apartheid era. Stories from that dark time come to the surface as we chat, about the great divides that apartheid created such as this one: A renowned black musician had to play from behind a curtain once, as black and white musicians weren't allowed to perform on the same stage.

"There are twenty guitar players per square kilometre, joke some people, and saxophonists behind every bush," writes Iain Harris, a music producer, journalist and founder of Coffee Beans Routes. "Cape Town is not one thing: it is many things in one. And so is our music." So it felt special to meet someone like Mac, who comes from a long line of musicians and remains active on the music scene. The next morning I meet up with Ronel, a friend of a friend and a Capetonian in-the-know. A down-to-earth hipster who grew up in a Cape Flats 'coloured' township, Ronel seems to know half of Cape Town, greeting everyone wherever we go. After a wander around boho Long Street, where she points out The African Music Store (134 Long Street) – a record shop with a great selection of South African music, where I later put a pretty serious dent in my wallet – Ronel's friends pick us up en route to her crowd's favourite Sunday outing.

Before I know it, I'm back in Gugs (as Gugulethu is also known), just a few streets away from Blackie and Sheila's house. A word about the township... The name is a contraction of igugu lethu, which in Xhosa (the township's predominant language) means our pride. It was established in the 1960s when Langa, the only black residential area for Cape Town at that time, became overcrowded (during the apartheid era, black South Africans were not permitted to live in the city of Cape Town). Many people were removed from neighbourhoods such as the fabled District Six, a now desolate area from which the Group Areas Act of 1957 forcibly removed many families to various areas on the Cape Flats, set out for 'coloured' and black townships, such as Gugulethu. These days, this vibrant black community is one of South Africa's fastest developing townships.

We arrive that Sunday afternoon to find the party at Mzoli's at full speed – chaotic, fun and crazy, with beautiful people sporting funky outfits and some of the most stylish looks and hairstyles I've seen in Africa. Known as Mzoli's Place, Mzoli's Meat, Mzoli's Butchery or Kwa-Mzoli, this unique butcher shop is widely known as just Mzoli's. Opened in 2003 by a local entrepreneur who saw a gap in the market for serving typical food in a traditional setting, the butchery was brought to life with a start-up fund from the Development Bank of South Africa. It's far from your regular butcher's though, although the meat sold here is of top quality. Mzoli's has turned into one of Cape Town's coolest hangouts for both locals and (a must stop) for visitors, with great down-home food, local DJs, and a diverse crowd. Located just off Klipfontein Road, it's

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open every day of the week but weekends are the prime time.

Things are pretty chaotic at Mzoli's. Without my insider friends, I'd have no clue how to get my food and have my fun. So for newcomers I can report that the procedure goes something

like this: First stop is the liquor store across the street (it's BYOB). Next up is the wait in line for the meat. After choosing your meat take it in a big bowl to the backyard and have it braai-ed (barbecued). During the rather long wait for the meat, distract yourself with the sound of the DJ spinning house tunes and the sight of a 200-strong crowd jamming in the afternoon heat. When the braai is done, pick up the big bowls of barbecued meat and pap and tuck communal-style, digging in with your hands. There's no crockery or cutlery given out at Mzoli's, but no matter – this is an eating extravaganza best enjoyed hands-on! I'm not sure whether it's the deliciously juicy meat, or an old house tune that I love pumping in the background, or the sunshine beating down, but at that moment I know I've cracked the surface of Cape Town.

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*Playing for Change is online at*  
[WWW.PLAYINGFORCHANGE.COM](http://WWW.PLAYINGFORCHANGE.COM).

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*Coffee Beans Routes organizes evening outings that take curious music enthusiasts into the heart of Cape Town's music scene, inside the homes of Cape Town musicians.*

[WWW.COFFEEBEANSROUTES.COM](http://WWW.COFFEEBEANSROUTES.COM)

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*Mac McKenzie runs the Cape Town Composers' Workshop out of his studio (which doubles as his home).*

[WWW.COFFEEBEANSROUTES.COM/CAPE-TOWN-COMPOSERS-WORKSHOP](http://WWW.COFFEEBEANSROUTES.COM/CAPE-TOWN-COMPOSERS-WORKSHOP)

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*Goema discography*  
*Nights with the Cape Gypsies by The Genuines*  
*Healing Destination by The Goema Captains of Cape Town*  
*Goema Music From Cape Town by Barry Van Zyl & The Bo Kaap Collective*

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