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Cape Town's Jazz Crusaders

By MEGAN LINDOW Wednesday, Mar. 25, 2009



SOUND OF THE GHETTO: Mac Mackenzie is one of several Cape Jazz musicians living in the notorious Cape Flats area
Iain Harris / Coffeebeans Routes

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In most cities, finding the hottest jazz is a matter of knowing which club to go to. But it's not so simple in Cape Town. Although this city boasts its own jazz genre (the lilting, highly improvisational Cape Jazz) and more than its fair share of musical talent — ranging from greats like Abdullah Ibrahim and Robbie Jansen to young impresarios like Kyle Shepherd and Jonathan Rubain — serious performance venues can be frustratingly sparse.

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One tour operator has found a way around the problem, by bringing visitors straight into the living rooms of some of the city's best jazz musicians. Part township tour, part music- and social-history crash course, and part intimate jam session, the four-hour Cape Town Jazz Safari, developed by a local outfit called Coffeebeans Routes, aims to overcome the city's notorious social fragmentation by making its rich cultural diversity more accessible. ([See 10 things to do in Chicago.](#))

Apartheid may have collapsed 15 years ago, but the forced evictions of blacks and mixed-race people from the city center during the 1960s left its mark as much in music as in everything else. Even now, musicians living on the Cape Flats, the massive expanse of gritty slums and working-class townships to which nonwhite Capetonians were removed, find themselves isolated from the city and from each other. "What we're doing through music and culture is trying to contribute to our urban regeneration," says Coffeebeans Routes co-founder Iain Harris.

Slowly, Cape Town's scene is showing signs of new life. This year, for example, marks the 10th anniversary of the

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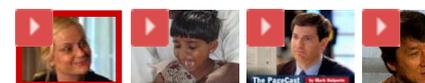
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Cape Town International Jazz Festival, which is fast gaining global renown. Scheduled for April 3-4, it now has more local artists than ever on the bill.

Harris' nighttime tour begins at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, adjacent to the harbor where such diverse musical influences as Brazilian samba and American jazz once mingled with the traditional drum rhythms of the indigenous Xhosa people to eventually form Cape Jazz.

From there, guests climb into a minivan and embark on a cultural treasure hunt across the Cape Flats, stopping at the homes of various musicians — among them guitarist Pokie Klaas. Sitting on an old crate in a bare room with a cement floor, Klaas riffs gently on his guitar and talks

about the music school he is setting up for local kids in his backyard.

The evening offers an intimate mixture of living-room conversation and informal recitals, with a heavy sprinkling of reminiscences about the Cape Town of old, where the jazz and carnival music filled the air of crowded polyglot neighborhoods.

Also on the itinerary is the home of Mac Mackenzie, the king of *goema*. This is the carnival music performed during the Second New Year — a uniquely South African celebration held on Jan. 2 and harking back to the times when slaves were only given that one day off a year. We drink Black Label beers and listen to Mac play his guitar. "There's going to be an explosion of music soon," he says, referring to the emergence of Cape Jazz from its long isolation. With that emergence will also come change — but for now the Cape Town Jazz Safari offers a chance to experience the music in its undiluted form. For details, see

www.coffeebeansroutes.com.

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