

Cape Town and all that jazz

Concerts are all very well, but on a music safari in South Africa you get that much closer to the action — right into the musicians' homes

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Recommended (5)



Jamming with iLanga le Afrika on a music holiday in Cape Town, South Africa (Paul Croughton)

Like all the best musicians, Mac McKenzie, composer, guitarist, sage and scallywag, is a storyteller. He'll regale you with tales of passion, of scandal and of oppression over a meal of fried fish in his home in Bridgetown, on the outskirts of Cape Town. My favourite involved all three themes.

"I had to get married recently," he said when I asked him why, on the cover of his latest album, he looks as if he's sucking a wasp. "My wife made me get a haircut. I'd let it grow all wild, like Beethoven. I was cross. Nobody told Beethoven to get a haircut." "So why did you have to get married?" I wondered. "My mother made me. She didn't like all the sex under her roof."

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Mac, as he is known to everybody, is 58, with six ex-wives and as many children. You'd think that nobody would be able to tell him anything. But then I met his mother, a diminutive sweetheart hiding under a woolly hat against the spring chill — "Say 'fornication', not 'sex'," she scolded Mac when he recounted the story again for her benefit — and I began to understand. Even the most talented mavericks need their mother's approval every now and again.

I was in Cape Town on a music safari, a new and novel way to get inside the city, and in less than two days I'd already met more locals than I could remember. I'd eaten with musicians in their homes,

listened to them perform, danced with them, drunk with them and talked a fair bit of rubbish with them (largely the result of the drinking). Now I'd even met mother.

The safari is the brainchild of a new offshoot of Original Travel, Original Music Travel, which provides musical adventures around the world.

I was somewhat concerned that, not having a goatee to stroke, I might not fit the mould of a music tourist, but I needn't have worried: as Iain Harris, OMT's man on the ground in Cape Town, told me, the musical element is merely a lens through which you view the city, its history and its attractions — Table Mountain, the wine routes, the beaches and the sunset cruises.

Trying to describe the music of Cape Town, however, is about as straightforward as trying to describe its people, equal parts “Where to begin?” and “How long have you got?”. The stories of both are so inextricably linked that separating the two is impossible.

Over the past 500 years, numerous groups of settlers have attempted to colonise the Cape from under the noses of the Bantu and Khoisan — the indigenous herders and hunter-gatherers who have lived there since before Christ. The Dutch East India Company tried first, arriving in 1652 to establish a halfway house along the trade route from Europe to the East. Hot on their heels were the French Huguenots, the Germans and the British — as well as up to 63,000 slaves herded from Mozambique, Madagascar, India and Malaysia, many of them Muslims.



V & A Waterfront with Table Mountain, Cape Town, South Africa (Fraser Hall)

Just as in other creole cities, such as New Orleans, music became the most vital form of self-expression for all the peoples of Cape Town. For the slaves, it was a way of mourning, protesting and unifying; for the Afrikaners, as the European settlers became known, it was how they celebrated their new world. And with so many nationalities intermingling, the musical boundaries were inevitably blurred.

One of the strongest strains that resulted was the carnival sound of the creole festivals, the biggest of which was Tweede Nuwe Jaar, the second new year, on January 2, when slaves would be granted a day off. It's party

music, the sound of liberation and celebration tinged with minor-key melancholy. This is “goema”, and it’s loud, raucous, infectious and fabulous — if you can last more than a minute without tapping a toe, you’re doing well. If you’re not dancing after five, you’re deaf.

Over on the Eastern Cape, meanwhile, musicians have brought the more improvisational nature of urban American jazz to goema over the past century, creating what has been dubbed Cape jazz. It’s no longer jazz as those goatee-stroking purists would define it — and it’s perhaps more accessible because of that — but the hip-swinging feel of the carnival is ever-present.

One group of musicians who bestride both camps are our man Mac McKenzie, Hilton Schilder and Alex van Heerden. The trio recorded together, separately and in various combinations for many years — Mac and Hilton were in a rock band called the Genuines 20 years ago, and all three recorded an album, *Healing Destination*, as the Goema Captains of Cape Town. Released in 2003, it’s part jazz, part roots, part swing and all goema. As an introduction to the sound of South Africa, it’s indispensable — and far more authentic than the myriad compilations of tribal drumming you’ll find at the airport.

Perhaps the most extraordinary piece of music to emerge from their collaborations, however, is a collection of tunes created by Schilder and Van Heerden under the banner RockArt. The album, *Future Cape*, is an otherworldly mesh of Cape jazz, goema, traditional African instrumentation and electronic sounds, voices and beats that would be as magical in a club as around a dinner table.

Sitting in Hilton’s home as he taps out a frantic percussive beat on the fretboard of his guitar, hammering the strings to produce a cascade of notes, or eating his wife’s chicken curry as he plays the Khoisan mouthbow (like the bow of a bow and arrow — he stuck it inside his cheek, so when he plucked the string, it resonated inside his mouth), you understand why both Schilder and McKenzie are regarded as Cape Town’s musical royalty, how deeply they feel their connection to the music they produce and why it’s a unique experience to be welcomed so intimately into their lives.

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After such an intense event — and after I’d made my artistic debut with a local marimba band, iLanga le Afrika, who produce some of the most joyous music from a dust-covered backyard — it was time to escape the city for a day, so I was whisked off down to Cape Point for a change of scene, a drive that would later take in Chapman’s Peak, one of the world’s most beautiful marine roads, with 114 curves and bends during its 5½ miles overlooking the Atlantic.

But first, having gleaned no further insight about South Africa’s musical heritage from the penguins at Boulders Beach, I struck far luckier in Redhill, at an overgrown farmhouse that is home to Derek

Gripper and family, who live something of a hippie existence among the trees, snakes and eye-popping views of the Cape Peninsula National Park.

Somewhere in between home-schooling his four barefoot children and installing compost toilets throughout his home (a blog on his website, derekgripper.com, details his attempts “to stay sane in a mad world/house”), Derek composes solo guitar pieces that merge classical techniques with styles from Africa and South America, and performs across Europe and Africa.

When I met him, we were both full of cold, so he brewed up a heavily spiced pot of chai using almond milk squelched from nuts growing on his land, and we sat looking out over green hills that stretch down to the tip of the continent. After the hustle of goema, Derek’s lullabies of repetitive, rippling refrains were almost hypnotic — quite how they emerge from his “mad house”, I have no idea. He too worked with Alex van

Heerden, and the record, Sagtevei, they produced together in 2002, with Brydon Bolton on the double bass and Alex on trumpet, accordion and occasional vocals, was widely acclaimed in classical and jazz circles.

The threesome were reunited for a concert in 2008 — and the live album that resulted from that night, Alex, by the Sagtevei Trio, is a gentle masterpiece. By this point, Alex and Derek were brothers-in-law, and had been making music together, on and off, for 20 years. Two weeks later, Alex van Heerden was killed in a car accident. He never heard that last recording.

Looking back on my week, it seems almost daft that I had reservations about what a music safari might involve. It turns out, of course, that it is almost exactly what you want it to be, from a simple soundtrack to your trip up Table Mountain to a remarkably powerful way to see into the lives of some extraordinary people. And a sure-fire method of blowing a small fortune on a stack of prized CDs, too.

NEED TO KNOW

Paul Croughton travelled as a guest of Original Music Travel and British Airways. OMT (020 7978 0500, originalmusictravel.com) has a week's African music safari from £3,200pp, including food, accommodation, music activities and flights. It also offers a three-night version for £1,920pp. Alternatively, British Airways (0844 493 0758, ba.com) has a seven-night fly-drive to Cape Town from £882pp, including flights from Heathrow and car hire. Or try Virgin Holidays (0844 557 5825, virginholidays.co.uk) or Trailfinders (0845 054 6060, trailfinders.com)