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# Featured: Gary van Wyk | Photographing Future South African Icons

Written by **Layla Leiman** on September 29, 2015 in **Featured, Interviews**

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Season 3 of the photographic project [21 Icons](#) is underway and has a new photographer behind the lens. Gary van Wyk has taken over from Adrian Steirn as the principal portrait photographer for this series, which pays tribute to the future



generation of South African leaders and icons. In response to the energy and dynamism of this contemporary generation of influencers, Gary has shot this series in vibrant full-colour which intends to capture and convey the optimism he feels for the future of our nation. Here, he tells us more about his involvement in the project and how he's allowed his personal style of documentary image taking to shape the visual atmosphere of this season of icon portraits.

**Having worked on the 21 Icons project behind the scenes for a few years, what are your feelings now that you've stepped to the fore as the chief portrait photographer?**

It is an incredible opportunity for me. I'm getting the chance to work with some of South Africa's most forward-thinking young people. It has definitely been a real challenge keeping up the high standard set by the first two seasons of 21 Icons, photographed by Adrian Steirn, but it's also been what has excited me most of all. I'm reminded that we have to challenge ourselves if we want to grow, and this is a challenge that I am really enjoying.

**While the past 2 seasons looked to the past, season 3 imagines the future icons of South Africa. Can you tell us a little about the traits that each of these young leaders possess?**

Each of season 3's icons have faced major challenges and then risen above it. They all embody the idea that no obstacle is too big when you believe in yourself. Not only have they made the best of the opportunities given to them, but they've also helped others to achieve similar dreams, paving the way for a generation to come. Throughout this season I've met some of the most selfless, brave, and inspiring individuals who are following their hearts and encouraging others to do the same.

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### Why is this series shot in colour? Does this relate to the themes of this season?

The past two seasons, which deal with South Africa's past, were shot in black and white. For me colour represents the present and moving into the future. I find that it captures so much more than black and white. Season 3 is all about the now, and I find that colour shows the world as it is today. It was also important for me to use colour because that's what I feel really speaks to the youthful energy of this season.

### Can you tell us a little about your photographic style, and how this will be visible in season 3?

I come from a news and documentary background, so my photographs are generally of spontaneous moments. This is the feeling that I sought to capture in the season 3 portraits. I like each photograph I take to give the feel that this is a scene that I happened upon by chance. I do prefer to work in available light but that's not always possible.

### Technically, what equipment do you use and swear by?

I use Nikon gear. I've shot most of the portraits with a Nikon D4s – it's a solid, reliable camera that never lets you down. I use a variety of lenses, generally fixed lenses. I find they are sharper than zoom lenses. My workhorse is a 35mm.

**What is the process for each 21 Icons shoot? Do you conceptualise the look for each portrait or is this done with a team or with the featured icon?**

I have a great team of brilliant minds working with me through the whole process. First, major research is done about the icon, which ultimately guides the concept for the portrait. I draw upon this research and translate certain character quirks or aspects of the icon's personality into how I see it visually. The icon is presented with the final idea and production makes the shoot happen. Lots of challenges emerge during production, especially finding locations, but it always comes together in the end.



'Self Expression' – Artist Athi-Patra Ruga

**When shooting a portrait, what are you aiming to capture?**

Each portrait has to tell a story about the individual. In one frame I try to capture a hint of their personality, what drives them, and their inner strength. I tend to see the best in people and I always try to show this optimism in my work.

**In a previous interview of yours I read that you're very influenced by nostalgia. In light of this project, how does your interest in the past affect the way in which you see the future?**

I think that remembering what we've been through gives us the strength to overcome any challenges we will face in the future. We have to learn from the past to make decisions that will improve our future. Hold onto the good and learn from the bad. Our future is bright. The 21 Icon project confirms this and pays tribute to the heroes of the past by taking our country forward with young, positive leaders who are shaping our future. Seeing what these young people are doing with the opportunities and freedom afforded to them has been truly inspiring.



'Cinderella Story' – Jes Foord

**In what ways have your travels influenced and affected the way in which you perceive your home country, South Africa?**

Travelling makes me realise how much I love our beautiful country. In being exposed to different parts of our world, I've begun to understand just how diverse, creative and unique we really are. Our diversity is our power and we embrace that. This country is at such an exciting point in its development. Now is the time for South Africa to shine!

**While I'm sure you can't say who season 3 will feature, can you give us a hint of what you're most excited about for this project?**

I'm most excited about showing South Africa what amazing young people we have making a difference in our country. I get to be a part of introducing some of these individuals to the world, and being a part of telling their stories has been such a privilege. Meeting these young icons has changed my life and I hope that being exposed to their stories will do the same for others.

[21icons.com](http://21icons.com)



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Written by **Layla Leiman**

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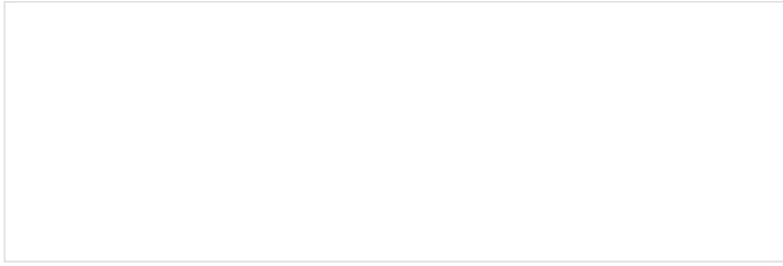
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