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21 Icons Season Three (A Future Of A Nation) Features Kyle Shepherd

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Kyle Shepherd – “What I love about jazz and improvisation is the freedom it gifts you. It allows you to be yourself.”

On 22 November 2015 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 12th icon of its third season: 28-year-old South African jazz composer and musician, Kyle Shepherd. An accomplished and influential pianist, he was born into a musical family in Cape Town, and is the son of Mechell Shepherd, a violinist who played for renowned jazz legend, Abdullah Ibrahim.

21 ICONS traces South Africa’s history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country’s growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. This season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country’s future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons.

Young South African talent Gary van Wyk (34) has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season. Adrian Steirn, who conceived the project, continues his involvement as one of the photographers capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

Shepherd has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III for his ability to transcend cultural barriers by using music as an art form to communicate commonalities and differences across diverse nations. He has used his aptitude for music as a thread to embrace and harness creativity in society.

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He attributes the connection between people and music to the idea that everyone plays an equal part in the formulation of jazz – the composer, the player/s and the audience – all contribute to making the music what it is.

He explains, "Jazz represents freedom. It also represents a wonderful kind of democracy with a band when there's two or three more people on an equal footing coming together to make music work. A player/audience is a weird symbiosis; there are three participants in music making."

The three-minute film, which will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel, showcases how Shepherd was first drawn to the world of classical music but switched to piano as a teenager.

During a portrait sitting the musical sensation tells Van Wyk about his musical influences, "With my mom, the thing I'm most thankful for was that she exposed me to so much music which is an invaluable thing. Then much later when I started playing jazz and improvisation and the piano, when I played those things it sounded so familiar, as if I knew it already. In less than a year, I had learned to play piano from scratch and really in a very obsessive way practiced all the time. Before I knew it I was still in high school but going to gigs at night."

Shepherd was raised in Belhar in the Western Cape and attended Settlers High School. It was here where he was introduced to his first academic mentor, Mr Smuts, who he still admires today for giving him the creative freedom to explore his musicianship while laying down the solid foundations needed to develop his intellectual and technical musicality.

He says, "He allowed me to play in school bands, and at that time we were living in a place called Belhar, and he introduced me to other members from the community who were jazz enthusiasts...feeding me the music and that was important. Looking back, all those things combined really made me who I am today."

When he matriculated, Shepherd enrolled at The University of Cape Town to study jazz. During his second year he decided that if he was going to make something of himself as a South African jazz artist that he would have to focus his energy and dedicate his time to honing his craft as a musician.

Shepherd, who is also a saxophonist, Xaru (traditional mouth bow) player, vocalist and poet, enlisted at Zim Ngqawana's Zimology Institute, which led to his residency and eventual creative partnership with the late flautist and saxophonist, Ngwawana.

At the young age of 20, he released his debut album '*FineART*' which earned him two SAMA nominations – one for Best Traditional Jazz Album and the other in the Best Newcomer category. Since his debut in 2007, he has released four albums and received numerous awards and nominations for his music.

He tells Van Wyk that while it is an honour to be recognised for his work that music is in his blood and the 'feeling' far outweighs the rewards, "What I enjoy most about jazz and improvisation is the gift it gives you. It allows you to be yourself."

In 2014, he was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award – an acknowledgment that industry experts felt was long overdue. This year he received the Newton Memorial Music Scholarship to study his Masters at Stellenbosch University.

He explains in a conversation with Van Wyk that pursuing a musical career is not an easy choice, "If I didn't love what I did, I would have never put up with the difficulties that go into a career in music. Especially jazz – it's by no means easy – there are economic difficulties and structural difficulties in terms of the infrastructure of the music scene as a whole in South Africa. There are no venues to play and we have to 'make' places to perform."

Shepherd's message to aspiring musicians is a straightforward one: "It's a full-time thing – in South Africa, we are surviving doing it but it's by no means easy and if we didn't love it, I don't think anyone would do it. In fact, I do not recommend it to anyone if you are not going to give it a hundred percent."

For the portrait '*Making It Up*' which will appear digitally on the Monday after his short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "Shot in Shepherd's studio at his grandmother's home in Cape Town's Grassy Park, Kyle is pictured playing the Grand Piano that he uses when composing his music. Seated before the instrument – his eyes shut – his reflection in the polished wood is caught in frame. The resulting image is one that imagines a musician and his instrument as one."

On the future of South Africa, he comments, "Opportunity that comes in the form of a silver spoon is gone which is a good thing. You just have to do the work. There are no short cuts. You've got to do the work and be committed to your craft – that's it!" he says.

Van Wyk concludes by asking the audience to share their stories on social platforms by answering the question: "*What do you stand for?*"

Followers are encouraged to share their personal triumphs or to nominate a member from the community who is making a profound difference.

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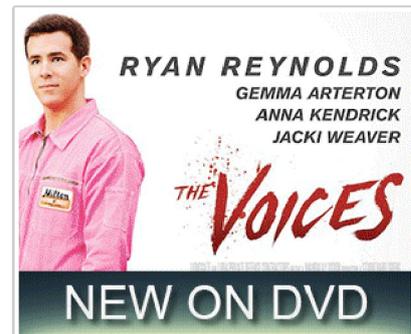
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