

ON TRACK Musician Pops Mohamed in Cape Town earlier this year as part of photographer and film maker Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons South Africa series PHOTOS: ADRIAN STEIRN



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We're like a pregnant country. We keep giving birth to good things, bad things, whatever it is, but we are here now

POPS MOHAMED

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Master tracker



IN THE BEGINNING



were'n't uncommon. This fuelled Mohamed's ambitions further, so when one of the music teachers took a special interest in him, he leapt at the opportunity with no hesitation.

Even so, Mohamed turned away from the prospects of commercial success when he realised the power of music as a weapon against the government's apartheid policies.

"It was during the 1970s, and I was listening to some heavy struggle songs, most of which got banned," he recalls.

"I looked at my career as a musician and thought: 'I'm playing top-40 stuff and there's all this stuff happening around us. If I want to continue with music, I must have a reason for it. I want to be part of what's happening now.' "That's when I started looking back to where I was coming from."

It was also around this time that Mohamed became aware of indigenous music - or more specifically, aware that such music was no longer being played on radio stations.

"I wanted to commit myself to something that would still satisfy me passionately inside, but would be a contribution to the country.

"That's when I decided I wanted to start preserving and protecting our culture. That was also part of the struggle - that we shouldn't forget where we were coming from."

Mohamed sees his commitment to preserving

traditions as "futuristic".

He explains this view: "It's the same as if you're having a problem with your hard drive. If you don't back up things, you lose them.

"It's the same with culture. If you don't know where you're coming from, you'll never know where you're going to. To move forward in life, you have to take a few steps backwards.

"You can't just live for now, or live in the future without understanding your background. It's not possible," he says.

● **Watch Pops Mohamed on SABC3 at 8.27pm today**

● **For more information, visit 21icons.com**
● **Download Zappar for free from your app store, scan the thunderbolt icon, and view the trailer and more**

This week, 21 Icons turns its lens on the seventh icon in the second series. Musician and music producer **Pops Mohamed** has been playing, protecting and nurturing traditional ways of making music in South Africa for almost four decades.

The portrait features Mohamed crouched on a sand dune in the traditional pose of a South African tracker.

In his hands he holds a traditional musical instrument, a symbol of the tradition he has fought to protect and preserve throughout his long and diverse career.

Mohamed talks about his life as a musician - a journey that began when he was a boy watching the jazz greats in his home town of Benoni.

"My best childhood memories are of watching the musicians who came from Johannesburg - Zakes Nkosi, Kippie Moeketsi, Miriam Makeba.

"They were all in exile but used to come and play at our community centre. We would sit on the steps of the hall waiting for the musicians to come and we would watch them and think: 'Wow, I want to be like that when I grow up.'"

Mohamed's first step towards fulfilling this childhood dream came as a student at Johannesburg's Dorkay House, a musical hub where sightings of greats like Abdullah Ibrahim