

BEHIND THE ICON
COLLECT THE POSTER



LITERARY LIFE Poet and author James Matthews gets ready to be photographed by Adrian Steirn

PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

“
We need to stop
thinking about
ourselves in an
exclusive way – as a
Xhosa, or a coloured,
or an Indian – and
start thinking about
ourselves as South
Africans

JAMES MATTHEWS

Revolutionary poet



ACTIVIST James Matthews is photographed in the Bo-Kaap, Cape Town, for the 21 Icons project
PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

The “dissident poet” James Matthews, a political prisoner who was born in District Six and used literature to oppose the apartheid regime, is this week’s icon. Our ninth 21 Icon has published a novel, and several collections of poetry and short stories, and has won numerous literary awards for his work.

For one pose during the photoshoot, Matthews stands on a cobbled street. His arms are held above his head, in the classic pose of a protester, but instead of holding a placard, he holds a typewriter - as befits a man who used poetry as a form of protest.

There was little about Matthews’ childhood to suggest that he would become one of the most important literary voices in South Africa. Leaving school at the age of 14, he took a job selling newspapers - and got his first taste of an unjust society.

“My classmates used to leave school and go to their nice houses. I would go stand on a corner selling papers and my money would go into a pot. It was two different lifestyles.”

Matthews says he wasn’t angered by the situation, but it did open his eyes to the differences between people - specifically, that white people weren’t subject to the same treatment and injustices as black people.

This observation gave rise to the realisation that words could be a weapon. Matthews penned his first protest pieces - short stories - before he decided that poetry was a more effective way to reach people.

His words certainly had an impact. So much so, in fact, that in 1972 the apartheid government moved to ban his first book, Cry Rage, as well as his second, Black Voices Shout. But in adversity lay opportunity. After Matthews’ publishers explained that,

The Dissident Poet



PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIRN



although they agreed with what he was saying, they couldn’t afford to represent him, he took matters into his own hands and published his works himself.

Although Matthews’ protest poetry led to his imprisonment by the apartheid government from September to December 1976, he never saw his banning as anything less than a victory against the system.

Matthews’ insistence on creating avenues for those without a voice led to the establishment of his other noteworthy venture: an art gallery for black painters. Just as he was aware of the need to publish work that the establishment feared to touch, he maintained that the gallery represented an opportunity to benefit black South Africans who, at the time, struggled to find the opportunity to exhibit their creations.

That said, the gallery came about largely through serendipity. “I knew the guy who owned this building and I asked if I could use it when he didn’t need it,” he says of finding the venue - a simple request, with lasting impact.

Lasting impact is something Matthews is familiar with. He recounts that he was walking through Athlone recently when, seeing him, a stranger shouted the phrase ‘Cry rage!’

“That book was written 40 years ago. To think that people still recognise what I wrote, it makes me feel very strong.”

- Watch James Matthews today on SABC3 at 8.27pm
- Download Zappar for free from your app store, zap the thunderbolt icon, and watch the trailer and more
- For more information, visit 21Icons.com

