

INSIDE GUIDE
PASSION PROJECT

There will be jazz

The past is connected with the present at The Athletic, a sexy, low-lit jazz club in the urban heart of the city.

Text *Stefania Johnson*

Circa 9pm. On any given Thursday. Through the velvet rope. Down the stairs. In the basement aka The Trophy Room, at The Athletic Club & Social, on the corner of Buitengracht and Castle, in the urban heart of the mother city. There will be jazz.

This is no traditional “sit down, quietly sip your Scotch and watch the show” jazz club. Here the patrons mingle, sway, riff, whoop and occasionally holler as they viscerally imbibe the vibe. Each live performance is an immersive, intimate experience. The kind that feeds your soul and rewires your limbic system. Inevitably, there is dancing later.

The space is dedicated to the late great Hugh Masekela, friend and mentor to The Athletic’s founder Athos Euripidou. “It’s important to me that this space keeps his spirit alive,” says Athos, a longtime champion of the anti-apartheid music scene. Photographs of Bra Hugh line the walls. Here’s the one of a young Hugh with the trumpet he was given by Louis Armstrong; there’s the one of a septuagenarian Hugh with Shunna “Sonny” Pillay, who he first shared a stage with at the age of 16. Coincidentally, both men were once married to Miriam Makeba.





PHOTOGRAPHS XXXXXX

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The past is connected with the present in this hallowed basement, and the musicians who perform in it today hail from all over Africa and sometimes further afield. Benjamin Jephta, Morena Leraba, Peter Ndlala, Rus Nerwich, the Feya Faku quintet, and N8N are but an amuse bouche of the talents who have showcased here. Some nights Felicity Nompumelelo Ntshangana will shimmy out of her working clothes and take the mic. She's a waitress at the club, who happened to do a soundcheck once and was serendipitously discovered as a songbird. She's now having voice lessons and the rest might be history. Or herstory. Watch this space.

There's a very sexy magic to it. When the lights are low, and the jazz notes are soaring you could be anywhere in the world. And yet, as New York City-based adman and occasional visitor, Ronald Wohlman says: "There is no other place like this in the world right now". Design dynamo and slow-fashion activist, Kat van Duinen, a regular at The Athletic concurs. "Athos has the most insane array of jazz bands I've ever heard in my life in South Africa. I'm wowed every time! There isn't another place with this kind of offering in Cape Town." Owner Athos has always marched to the beat of his own drum. "I don't really like to open up trend places,"

he says. A Ladysmith-born lad, Athos cut his music teeth in downtown Durban conjuring urban-legendary hotspots such as Society and The Zulu Jazz Lounge. For a time, he managed Madala Kunene, accompanying him to Hugh Masekela's last concert in Carnegie Hall where, in an I-must-be-dreaming moment, he found himself grooving next to Harry Belafonte as the crowd rose to their feet in ovation. Athos' first official business was a video store called Planet, but even back in those days he was drawn to the experiential – running movie-themed parties as a side hustle. His debut party gig was inspired by the Guy Ritchie film Snatch. "At 12pm the lights went out and a boxing ring was unveiled; two heavyweights fought it out for three rounds." Needless to say, the punters loved it. What Athos loves is the grit of urban, inner city spaces. When the Durban scene moved to Ballito, he moved to Cape Town. He is motivated by the desire "to create a unique experience, something different and compelling, a place with depth and purpose, a space that's inclusive and that drives social cohesion. My approach is that it is not my venue, but a platform for artists, musicians and other people to be creative." Music aside, while the 2022 Investec Cape Town Art Fair was in town, The Athletic partnered with KZNSA gallery to exhibit works by Siobhan Doughty and Siphesihle Ntsungwana, sharing Durban talent with the mother city. "If you create a space for people to be amazing, everyone can be amazing." Athos' winning formula is the triple threat: "Really good food, amazing décor and brilliant live entertainment. Each component has to be at a top level." At The Athletic Club & Social it certainly is. Located in a 19th-century heritage property that was once the Tothills Pharmacy Building, The Athletic is spread over three storeys with multiple, interconnected and gorgeously curated spaces. An impeccable playlist and vinyl DJs (upstairs and in the



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basement from Thursdays through the weekend) ensure that the soundtrack is always on point.

The *trapezaria* (Greek for dining room) on the ground floor serves “simple and delicious” Mediterranean food with a Cypriot twist. “Everything is made on the premises, even the daily bread,” says head chef Law Mawoneke, who sports a capacious Rasta crochet hat instead of a *toque blanche* – all the better to contain his mane of dreadlocks. After stints at Vandiar’s, La Petit Tarte and The Roundhouse as sous chef and head pastry chef, Law joined The Athletic team as a CDP (chef de partie for those not in the know) and worked his way up to pole kitchen position. His favourite dish to serve is the lamb kleftiko, marinated for 24 hours before being slow-cooked in a red wine and spice combination that allegedly originated 500 years ago. “So tender, I get no returns,” he smiles. For vegans Law recommends the Tahini Cauliflower with Baharat spice, homemade hummus and toasted almonds. “Once you taste, you’ll never waste,” he declares. Kat van Duinen is a fan.

Upstairs at The Athletic, there are a lot of places to hang out and be seen – or not to be seen, should you prefer. You can order classic cocktails in the Library Bar, share mezze on the balcony, have a smoochy rendezvous, a party, or a business



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meeting in one of the interleading private booths, each of which has its own name, such as Spot of Country and The Basil D’Oliveira Room. The Papwa Sewgolum Room is named after the best South African golfer you’ve probably never heard of. In 1963, Papwa defeated Bobby Verwey and Denis Hutchinson to win the Natal Open but had to receive his trophy under an umbrella in the rain because, as a man of Indian descent, he was not allowed to step inside the Durban Country Club. (FYI: the club apologised to his family over 40 years later in 2005.)

The Athletic Club & Social holds its secrets and the walls tell many untold stories of South Africa’s sporting history. A photograph of Herbert Tothill in a sports blazer was the catalyst for the décor, which, as in all



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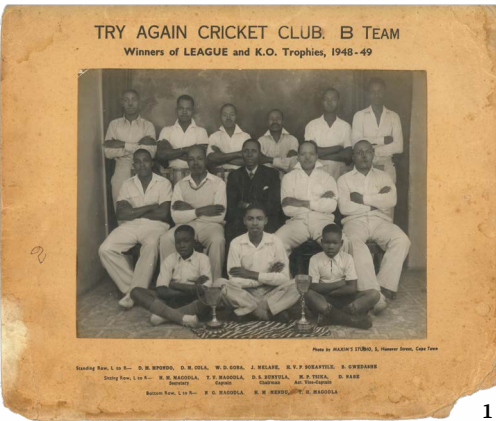
of the spaces conjured and curated by Athos, has an element of nostalgia to it. Think well-aged leather club chairs, antique velvet couches, fringed lampshades, exotic wallpapers, and an eclectic array of sporting paraphernalia and photographs from the past. It is a collection that is still making memories.

Athos points out the photo of “The Try Again Cricket Club B Team winners of League and K.O. Trophies 1948-49” and recalls a moment that for him was “when this space felt true to what it stands for. I met a doctor called Tito Augusto randomly having a glass of wine on the patio outside. I walked him through the space and showed him all the photos and he became very emotional. We chatted. He told me that he had played rugby in the late 60s early 70s; his brother was a very good player who would have made the national team had it not been for apartheid. The next time he visited he came with his friend Tengo, who spotted this picture of his father’s cricket team. It was the first time he had seen the photograph.”

Sometime later Athos received a WhatsApp from Tengo Sokanyile reading: “Last Saturday I had lunch in your restaurant, I saw the picture of my father. My nephew Temba Bavuma wants to visit your restaurant. I’ll bring him with Tito.” Temba (for out of towners) just happens to be the captain of the South African national team in limited-overs cricket.

Build the church and the people will come, the saying goes. Undoubtedly, the best thing about this venue is the frequenters of it. The regulars and the occasional visitors. The crowd. Afropolitan, sophisticated, eclectic. A lot like jazz.

Like jazz, The Athletic has Africa in its DNA. Like jazz, it is the result of both a singular vision and the polyphonic ensemble playing of a talented and passionate team. No password, secret knock or specific handshake is required to get in. But booking is recommended for the live music nights. See you there. Maybe.

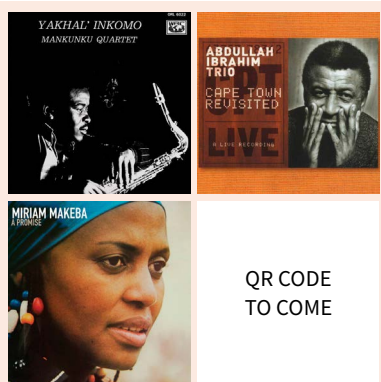


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