With only a suitcase, a Leica, and a mountain of courage, German photographer Jürgen Schadeberg set off for South Africa at the beginning of the 1950s. For more than a decade he experienced and documented the anti-apartheid movement, the swinging jazz scene, and got involved in Drum, a socio-political magazine. LFI met with the “father of South African photography,” a man both brave and humble.

PHOTOS: JÜRGEN SCHADEBERG
Previous page: Dorothy Masuka, singer and composer, 1952, still a diva in Africa today
Above: The fence at the Racecourse divides skin colour: on the left black people, on the right white people – Johannesburg Racecourse 1954

From top to bottom: The first night of the Sophiatown removals when 2000 police forced people out of their homes in 1955. "We Won’t Move". The ANC called for people to resist the enforced removal. Premiere of the controversial and racially charged film, "Cry the Beloved Country." by Alan Paton, where there was a strong police presence.

Right: Henry Nxumalo (Mr. Drum), the most courageous investigative journalist. Henry fought to expose injustice, cruelty, and narrow-mindedness and was murdered in 1957 while investigating a piece.
Left. The annual “Durban July” horse race was the highlight of the social calendar.

Right clockwise: Vy Nkosi, well-known trombonist – his horn produced tremors in the bowels of the earth. The three Jazzolomos: Jacob “Mzala” Lepers (bass), Ben “Gwawu” Mrwebi (alto sax), Sol “Beegeepee” Klasste (piano). In the mood during a township shuffle. At the Ritz, downtown Jo’burg, the place to go for a jive come Friday night.
Left top: Nelson Mandela (centre) during the Defiance Campaign Trial with Dr Moroka (left), then President of the ANC, and Jusuf Dadoo, President of the Indian Congress, (right). Below: Defiance Campaign Meeting, Freedom Square 1952
Right top: Throughout the city there was the sound of penny whistles and guitars, and pennies were flying everywhere. Below: Private golf lesson, Sophiatown, 1952

Right: The shuffling “Ducktails” arrive at the Rand Easter Show. South Africa’s largest consumer trade fair is a favourite social event for young and old
Right. Waiting for the trucks: their homes have been demolished and they’re ready to be moved to the matchbox houses in Meadowlands.

Right clockwise: Blacks had to carry passes. If they were caught in the city without a pass, they were thrown in jail. Haircuts were available at most rail or bus stops around the cities of South Africa. A visit to a farm.
Sophiatown was a large, multi-cultural neighbourhood in the centre of Jo’burg. It was here that the progressive magazine Drum’s heart beat during the fifties. Born in Berlin in 1931, Jürgen Schadeberg started studying lens and photo technology in 1946 in his home town, following it up with an apprenticeship in Hamburg at the German Press Agency. He left Germany in 1950, exchanging Berlin’s ruins for the city of Johannesburg. From 1951 to 1959, he worked for Drum magazine and influenced the face of South African photography like no other, taking photographs of black intellectuals, jazz musicians, and anti-apartheid fighters. In 1964, Schadeberg left his adopted home, and began working as a free-lance photographer in London, New York, and Hamburg. At the beginning of the eighties he returned to Johannesburg where he started making documentary films. The photographer currently lives in France.

LFI: Mr Schadeberg, what moved you to go to South Africa in 1950?
Jürgen Schadeberg: I was young, I wanted to see the world. And above all, I wanted to get out of Germany. I was naïve enough to believe that everyone outside the country was good and non-racist. I didn’t know anything about the situation there, about apartheid, the new government. You just didn’t read about it in local papers at the time. There was simply no news about Africa.

LFI: So you just wanted to get away?
Schadeberg: Yes. I was looking for adventure, and I imagined South Africa as a wild country.

LFI: What was your first impression when you got there?
Schadeberg: When I got to Cape Town I caught a train to Johannesburg. In my compartment was an older, respectable man who spoke fluent German. I was shocked to discover he was the most extreme fascist, Nazi racist I’d ever met. His name was Dr Von Rensburg and he was the head of the “Ossewa Brandwag.” That was the guerilla group that was fighting underground at the time and that later took over the government. They were closely connected with Germany and the Nazis. So I went from a rain shower into a downpour. From one end of fascism, to the beginning of another – it was ghastly. Looking back, I knew after half an hour – I couldn’t stand it any longer in the compartment – what South Africa was all about.

LFI: Even so, you stayed …
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fighters and considering your work for Drum was rather unusual?
Schadeberg: Oh yes. From the point of view of white people, I wasn’t quite right in the head.
LFI: Were the blacks afraid of their contact with you?
Schadeberg: No, on the contrary. They were happy that someone showed interest in their problems, someone who asked questions, reported on their situation, and took photographs.
LFI: You also photographed the Johannesburg jazz scene which was closely linked to the anti-apartheid movement. What’s your relationship to music?
Schadeberg: I didn’t like anything with me. They would have definitely taken it all away from me. I haven’t got them all back, but most of them. I also wanted to make a couple of films there with my wife. Then we just got stuck there. And I published a dozen books.
LFI: Who did you photograph the Johannesburg jazz musicians?
Schadeberg: That’s very hard to say. I really liked that as well. I had to find my negatives. And also studied painting in Spain for a while.

Schadeberg: In South Africa at the time, music was one way to oppose the government. Music represented the idea of freedom. Listening to American jazz music, your relationship to music?
Schadeberg: Yes, but painting is all about time. The process can take ten minutes, a day or a few hours. Time changes things and one is influenced by the change. When you photograph, you see. You don’t go through time. You shoot with the camera and it just takes a brief moment. So you can’t really compare these two disciplines. Some photographers want to paint with photography. That doesn’t really work with the nature of photography.
LFI: Both mediums, painting and photography, produce pictures …
Schadeberg: No, I’m just a human being. I may be interested in social and human conditions, but I’m not political. If I’d been political, then I wouldn’t be able to criticise the ANC today. But I can.
LFI: Why did you become a photographer?
Schadeberg: I would have also liked to have been a musician, but I’m not at all musical.
LFI: But why did you pick up a Leica?
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LFI: You cover a variety of themes. Which is the most important one for you personally?
Schadeberg: The most important one is what’s most important for humanity.
LFI: We’re presenting photographs all the way from the fifties to present day. Has your photography changed throughout your life?
Schadeberg: That’s interesting. An Italian magazine once published a photo that became very famous. On the other side was the contact sheet with 35 pictures of which probably about 20 were good shots, right? Even so, at any given time they would probably choose a different picture: a picture that fits in with the current zeitgeist …
LFI: So it’s not through taking the picture, but through the choice?
Schadeberg: Yes, that’s often the case but not always. A photographer always hopes to choose something timeless, but that’s hard. If I were to look through my pictures today, I’d probably choose ones that I ignored before, because at the time they didn’t cause such a strong impression.
LFI: That means that you took photos which you thought were right to take at the time, and not just what people wanted.
Schadeberg: Yes, I hope so.

2008 Exhibitions:
7.–28.6. Würzburg, Afrika Festival.

Further Information: www.juergenschadeberg.com

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