Drum Magazine: The Fifties in South Africa

The Fifties may not have been a golden age in South Africa, but they were one of the most creative and inspiring times in politics and the arts. Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo transformed the African National Congress from an intellectual debating society into a mass organisation. The Defiance Campaign set out to counter the apartheid laws. Political repression and economic recession imposed extreme hardships on the majority of the population.

At the same time places like Sophiatown near Johannesburg or District Six in Cape Town developed into forms of great cultural and social activity. In the shebeens people of all races and social backgrounds met. The Fifties also saw the birth of a new generation of South African artists. Writers like Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi and Nat Nakasa attacked the system through their essays and stories; photographers like Jürgen Schadeberg and Peter Magubane documented conditions, musicians like Hugh Masekela and Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim) started their careers.

In 1951 the first black magazine was launched in Johannesburg. Drum became the forum for the emerging black writers and photographers. Drum documented repression, social life and the ability of the people to celebrate despite all the hardships. The German publisher's reader Klaus Humann and the photographer Jürgen Schadeberg visited the Drum archives in Johannesburg and have compiled a collection of photographs with accompanying literary texts of outstanding quality. They selected some 150 photos on many different aspects of life in the Fifties. In addition extracts from Drum, most of them published here in German for the first time, add a literary tribute to the work and times of Drum. Nelson Mandela wrote the foreword and the former editor of Drum, Anthony Sampson, gives an introduction to the history of the magazine. Christoph Plate has translated the literary contributions and compiled a chronology of the most important political events of the Fifties.

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