

Forlorn, forgotten forerunner of cosmopolitan South Africa



By [Richard Clarke](#)

5 Aug 2002

Remember the trendy, hip place that was the place to be. Yeoville in the 80's. Whether the place went down before the marketability edge was lost or the market was moved to more trendy places and things leaving a vacuum is a moot point.

This is now the melting pot of Africa. A street wise white boy named Michael from Kwazulu-Natal told me that, as he pointed out people from Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and even some from Morocco.

This is the point where the tides flowing down Africa meet in South Africa's original cosmopolitan area. I sit and chat to a cool dude named Jimmy who tells me in all seriousness that, "One must hit the weed don't let it hit you!" The conversation had drifted onto drugs and people that drink too much and Jimmy had provided the neatest answer I had heard in a long while.

Rockey street in Yeoville is nowadays a little bit more of this and a lot less than that if one compares it to the white liberal playground of the 80's and early 90's.

Things are a lot more informal now with plenty of shebeens, kiosks with telephones and little informal trading shops.

The sense of hopelessness is never far away though as down and outs are also hanging around amidst the artists, musos, hustlers, informal traders, students and philosophers.

Newspapers and elections mean little in these people's lives as politicians cannot help them make or break their lives. It all carries on regardless with a mix of opportunity, pragmatism and brutal poverty all shaken and stirred just 10 minutes walk from the Sunnyside Hotel.

Living just from one moment to the next, Michael explains that Rockey street is made up of those who live below the breadline and those that live slightly above. It's all about a continuous hustle and living on an edge bordered by crime and hunger.

The essence of life under these circumstances is survival amidst the constant atavistic descent into the maelstrom of Darwin's prophecy. White liberals are far away, the vibe has changed and not everyone understands a really 'African vibe' as opposed to the 'tourist thing'.

Most of the world sees the four or five notorious blocks of Rockey street as synonymous with Yeoville. However there is life

out here that operates differently involving people that also think differently.

Tracy, a single mother, owns a 4 bedroom house in Yeoville with Oregon Pine floors and pressed steel ceilings. Old designs and architecture like this can be had for a steal. R100 000 that may get you a one bedroomed townhouse in upmarket suburbs North of the city if you're lucky.

"The suburb itself is more cosmopolitan than ever, I like living there. I'm a (white) IT journalist, raising a six-year-old daughter in the heart of the suburb."

"There are many professionals and families living here, among the entrenched pensioners, single foreigners, new arrivals to Johannesburg, the suspicious-looking and the just plain odd. In seven years, we have never had a break-in. We've met plenty of really interesting people, though."

It seems that it's all about how you see life. Jacob Wulana, lead vocalist, guitarist and harmonica player in a band called Tidal Waves, says that it's all about the community. It's about feeling part of a community that lives, sleeps, eats and parties together.

We are sitting chatting at Hard Times Café and Jacob is passionate about Africa and being African. When he talks of music he is at pains to stress that he doesn't come from Jamaica and has in fact never been there. Music is about origins and "there are things about life and music that the rest of the world can learn from Africa."

"Sometimes I think people don't love our country enough," says Jacob, "there is too much of a connection with America or Europe."

We joke about how ridiculous it is to watch Castle Lager being advertised with American music. The idea that only American music can be cool and hip is somehow quite ludicrous in these surroundings.

Jacob goes on to add that it affects writers, poets as well as artists and movie directors. "People will turn to a local artist and say something like he's good for a South African."

Somehow being patronising about one's fellow citizens seems quite out of place in an area where ordinary people are getting on with ordinary lives far away from the ridiculous arms deal and AIDS conspiracy theories.

The architecture is a mix of turn of the century, graffiti and face brick functionality that has charted the course of struggles through much of the twentieth century.

Discussion nowadays is not politics but a mix of survival tactics, philosophy and wry humour. Add in a cautious dash of optimism in a moment of relative success and you have the cocktail that flavours this forlorn, forgotten forerunner of cosmopolitan South Africa.

ABOUT RICHARD CLARKE

Richard Clarke founded Just Ideas, an ideas factory and implementation unit. He specialises in spotting opportunities, building ideas and watching them fly. Richard is also a freelance writer.

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