

A Black man with a beard and glasses is shown in profile, facing right. He is wearing a blue denim jacket that has been splattered with white paint or ink in a pattern resembling a tiger or leopard print. The background is a solid, warm brown color. The text "Black Coffee's" is overlaid in the lower half of the image.

Black Coffee's

DJ and producer **BLACK COFFEE** has long been one of SA's hottest exports. Now he's inviting other African artists to share the world stage through his latest business venture. **BERND FISCHER** finds out more

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Shirt R13 800
T-shirt R5 300
Pants R20 200
Sneakers R10 400
Prada

African Dream

N **KOSINATHI
MAPHUMULO**

is a busy man, as I witnessed on a recent winter day in July, when I met the record producer and DJ – better known as Black Coffee – on set for his GQ cover shoot in a small studio in Jo’burg. The music-meets-business man had a meticulously planned schedule ahead: directly after our time with him, he’d be hosting – through his record label Soulistic and his streaming service GongBox – a panel discussion on the future of music and digital content in Africa, followed by an evening appearance at the Axe Party of the Year. We were pressed for time and the DJ’s mannerisms, though subtle, expressed that. »

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I’m happy, seeming like I have
everything under control.
In my real world, life needs
to be as real as possible’



Shirt R1 499
Jacket R3 899
Pants R24 999
G-Star RAW

>
Hat POR
Simon & Mary
Gillet R2 999
G-Star RAW
T-shirt R849
Calvin Klein



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Despite being surrounded by a lively entourage on set, Black Coffee comes across as rather reserved. He changed outfits and poses when required, but appeared to just want to get the job done. When the shoot wrapped, he sat down, about to get groomed for his next scheduled event, and gestured to me that he was ready for the interview. I sat next to him while he stared into a mirror, focussed, and had his hair and face attended to.

Just a few days before landing in Jo'burg, the DJ had played Tomorrowland for the first time. He was also right in the middle of his second consecutive Hi Ibiza club residency on the Spanish party island, which began in May and wraps up early October. While acknowledging how fortunate he has been, Black Coffee isn't close to being satisfied.

'I have a lot of those,' he said, when asked whether he recalls a specific moment in his career when he realised that he finally 'made it'.

'To say I've made it, you know, I don't think I'm there yet. I just feel that I'm very blessed to have the team that I have that works tirelessly to make these things happen for me,' he said modestly.

Jet-setting to far corners of the earth, whether it's from gig to gig or to spend time with his family (which he does often, despite his hectic lifestyle), hasn't come easily. 'It may seem like I just came out of nowhere,' he told me, adding that it was always part of his plan to 'first build a foundation here at home.'

The 42-year-old established a steady music career in South Africa, starting nearly two decades ago, but it wasn't until his self-titled album in 2005 that he gained mainstream popularity. Then, in 2015, his fifth studio album release, *Pieces Of Me*, which reached double-platinum status at home, catapulted the house and electronic DJ to new heights, with more international attention to follow. To date, Black Coffee has won a number of South African Music Awards, boasts the title as the first South African artist to win a BET Award, and last year bagged his third win at the annual DJ Awards. Also under his belt, collaborations with Alicia Keys, Drake, and most recently, David Guetta, not to mention his friendship with fellow DJ and current artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton, Virgil Abloh. The two can often be seen DJing together or posing casually in front of a private jet on Instagram.

Black Coffee says he purposefully posts more on social media about his professional life than he does his private life. 'Social media is for work and I've seen its power,' he explained. 'I've seen how much it influences and motivates people who want to work like I do, who have dreams to do what I do. But anything personal, there's a limit for me.'

Track record aside, Black Coffee reiterates that he's far from done. 'I've always been paranoid about seeming like I'm successful,' he told me. At this point in our conversation, the DJ is no longer looking in the mirror, but he has turned his body so that he is seated sideways, now directly facing me. My initial impression of him as slightly standoffish slowly began to change. He's sincere and thoughtful as he continues to answer. 'I'm so real about so many things. I'm paranoid about seeming like I'm happy, seeming like I have everything under control. In my real world, life needs to be as real as possible.'

Looking back, I ask him, when he began his studies in jazz music at the now-Durban University of Technology, if he ever imagined he'd find himself where he is right now at this moment.

'No. Far from it,' he answered, adding that most people who pursue jazz studies likely end up as either teachers, or unsurprisingly, jazz performers. But Black Coffee took another route, first performing as a backup singer for South African musician Madala Kunene, and then

forming Afro-pop group SHANA (Simply Hot and Naturally African) with Mqobi 'Shota' Mdabe and Thandukwazi 'Demor' Sikhosana, signed under record label Melt 2000. It was in 2003 when Black Coffee was invited to join the Red Bull Music Academy that he would officially be introduced to the makings of the house music scene.

'They're extremely important,' he replied when asked about the value of these kind of initiatives, like the one he was part of, in fostering new talent. 'But some people go there expecting more. To be carried, to be looked after,' he added. 'If you really want this, they will light the fire for you – and for me they did that – for me they're like family.'

Born in Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal, Black Coffee wished when he was growing up that there were more positive role models to look up to. But he recalled a story that would continue to have a positive impact on his life to this day. 'I remember when I was in standard six, there was a lady that came to our school – today they are still one of the biggest accounting firms – and at the time she was the first black chartered accountant, the first woman, in this country. I had no interest in accounting, but her coming to our school and talking sparked so much in me. And that's the same thing I want to do for the guys who might think I'm so far, so unreachable, that I can't talk to them.'

Apart from smaller-scale mentoring, Black Coffee has much bigger plans. (He revealed that he has a WhatsApp group where he acts like a 'big brother' to local, unknown and underground musicians, who share their work and ask for his guidance. Sometimes, the DJ will sample from their mixtapes to give them more exposure). 'They want to know what drives me, they want to know my story so they can be inspired.' But, as he revealed to me, we still have a long way to go. 'We are learning to be proudly South African. I try by all means to create a balance to show the world that we are on the same level. Our music has never been inferior, we just didn't have the platform.'

This is where projects like GongBox, Black Coffee's streaming app similar to the likes of Apple Music and Spotify, aims to disrupt. The service, tailored for an African market, encourages aspiring artists to upload their content to showcase their music. The DJ also hopes the app will encourage Africans to follow in his footsteps by creating their own platforms.

'For the longest time as Africans we have been subjected to help,' he explained. 'It goes as far as when we start our own businesses – we don't know how to lead. Multinationals come and take over. We're just taking what we've been given. When can we start creating? Then we can also export.'

On his own success, Black Coffee credits corporatising what he does. 'From the beginning, I looked around the industry, and people I looked up to at the time, nobody had offices. The first thing I wanted to do was have an office and have someone working for me and someone looking after my brand,' the DJ explained. 'Once you corporatise your structure, you have planning. We're not just going with the flow, we plan ahead. We're almost done with next year already. By the time the year starts, we just press play.'

It's these sort of conversations Black Coffee hopes to continue with those in the music industry. 'In the past I've been doing stuff alone with my team. And a lot of stuff that I've done has influenced the industry and now I've started a new journey, basically saying that, "This journey I want us to start together."'