

Spinning the globe

Award-winning South African record producer and DJ Nkosingathi Innocent Maphumulo, better known as Black Coffee, is a firm believer in the transformative power of travel

One of the big winners at the 22nd Annual South African Music Awards was DJ Black Coffee. He won Best Dance Album, Best Engineered Album, and Album of the Year (served hot by Nescafé) for 'Pieces of Me'. He also won the International Achievement Award in recognition of his meteoric rise on the global dance scene.

Other top awards include him being chosen to grace the cover of MixMag—the first African DJ to have this honour—and being named the authoritative dance music magazine's Star of the Year. He also scooped the Dance Nation of the Year Award for South Africa and Best Breakthrough Artist Award at Ibiza's prestigious DJ Awards last year.

Achievements such as these, much like winning Best International Act: Africa at the BET Awards, have become an important way to grow his brand outside South Africa, where he's already exceptionally done well. At the same time, he doesn't feel a sense of pressure to represent the country when travelling abroad.

"South Africa is too big a country for me to nominate myself as an ambassador," he says. "There are, and always have been, a lot of artists helping to brand South Africa. Yes, I showcase South African music at the highest level. But I don't take on the responsibility or 'represent' the country. I concentrate more on what I'm doing. I have so much love for it and I get nervous to showcase that."

Given that the story of who he is and what he does is so widespread, thanks to the internet, his international audience is familiar with his music.

If anything, because he often goes to countries where people already know him, there isn't much difference in how listeners respond,

although he does make a few adjustments to the song selection, depending on where he is.

"I believe I have a lot to offer," he says. "Usually, wherever I play, I sit and watch and learn, hoping that other DJs are also going to sit and watch and learn. I've learned a lot about the songs they play and what makes them tick compared to what makes South Africans tick. It's different things and it's different elements; that's the stuff I'm learning."

His process of learning new things "slowly but surely" isn't just about the music. In his travels, he's also learned about so much more. By experiencing the reality of each place he visits, he's been able to overcome certain misconceptions and hype that the media has fed him for years.

"We grew up in a different world," he says. "It shocked me the first time I was travelling. For example, there aren't as many German cars in Germany as there are German cars in South Africa. We assume that there must be. And then you go to Amsterdam and it's bicycles instead of cars. We learn so much and when we come back, we understand things better."

He's discovered much during his travels so far. His world tour, which began in January last year, saw him perform over fifty acts in 17 countries including the United States, Canada, Spain, France, Ireland, Poland, Germany, Italy, Japan, and more. His favourite destinations so far are New York, London, and Greece.

"I feel like I'm growing and have learned a lot," he says. "I get to go to New York and see that New York is not as it is on TV and that what's special in New York isn't so special in South Africa. I get to go to London, meet the people, and see it as it is. Travelling has literally changed my life."

Because travelling has had such a positive impact on his life, it's not surprising that DJ

Black Coffee often encourages his friends to travel too. Even if it's just for a weekend, or just once a year, he's a strong believer that it's something everyone should do.

"I always tell my friends in South Africa to come and see me play or just take time away," he says. "I encourage it as much as I can. I also tell the guys at home that it's not as expensive as they think. Save money, book a flight, find a hotel, and go to a place you've never been. It's such an eye-opener. You always come back a different person. And the more you do it, the more you learn."

Even though DJ Black Coffee encourages people to have global perspectives, he believes that we should embrace local perspectives too. That's why he considers the SABC's controversial decision to play 90% local music on its radio stations as "one of the most brilliant things that has ever happened for the country."

"It's not just bold but there's so much reality about it," he says. "The reality being that South Africa today isn't the South Africa it was ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago. Twenty years ago, an 18-year-old in South Africa was consuming something different—whether it's in clothes or lifestyle or where they hang out—to what an 18-year-old in South Africa is consuming today. And I've always felt that we were so stuck in the old."

Indeed, because Africa today is different from what it was in the past, DJ Black Coffee believes that the time is now for us to be exposed to more of what's home-grown. And instead of sending money away to other countries to import what they have to offer, we can invest the money where it belongs.

"It's such a bold move but also such an inspirational move," he says. "I hope other people learn from it; not necessarily doing it the same way but as a way to wake up and look around." 🍌



Photo: Nick Boulton

I Am Not a Dj