

Conversation with Jimi Mathews in Cape Town, 11/85

Mathews: (I was born) in Cape Town. In 1955. He grew up there. I am a freelance photojournalist and cameraman. Working for foreign television networks mainly. The reason for that is that I do a lot of work for ECDN, the Dutch T.V. network as well. And later today I will be doing some stuff for TS1, French. I would imagine that 80% of film work I do for VIS News, the BBC, but I am not not contracted to them at all.

Alex: What about, as far as, still photography goes, what exhibitions and/or publications would you like mentioned?

Mathews: Well, in July, from the second of July to 16th, 1985, I exhibited at Barcelona, The exhibition was sponsored by UNESCO. And it was to commemorate the international year of the youth. I was also, it was at the Palacio de Congreso in Barcelona. It was UNESCO's official celebration of the year of the youth. And then in June 1985, I had this exhibition to commemorate June 76. And that was sponsored by the GLC. Yeah, I have had a few of the one man shows in Europe in Amsterdam. In Frankfurt, at Club Voltaire? In South and Southern Africa, I participated in a number of group shows; "Culture and Resistance" in Botswana, The StaffRider. (All the StaffRider) No, this year I didn't. But in 1983 and 1984 I did. The thing at UCT, the Carnegie Exhibition. Everyone in this was in it.

Well this one and the German (book project).

Alex: We're interested in having you talk about growing up in Cape Town. We know something of your background and have read some of your father's stories, but would like to know about your childhood in Cape Town.

Mathews: Well, I grew up in a fairly eccentric house. On hindsight, I think we were extremely lucky. My father as you know, is a writer. So I grew up meeting at a very early age writers, painters, musicians, and fighting against that. Yeah, my aspirations were more conventional and petty bourgeois, precisely because I saw these fantastic people, hell of a creative people, but always battling. You know, musicians who would come around my father and complain about gigs they had not been paid for or that they had been ripped off, or writers who wrote fantastic books and were bumming bus fare, likewise for painters.

And so my aspirations as a child were very petty bourgeois. I wanted to be an architect. But then even that, I grew up in very working class environment. I was the first guy now to matriculate. It's fantastic, but it was really true. I was the first guy in the neighborhood to go to the university. Because people's expectations were not that. As soon as you were old enough, you went out to find a job. But my father had this great faith in education. If one was educated, you could escape the discrimination in this country, or at least deal with it on your own terms.

So, I wanted to be an architect, whereas most of the guys in the

neighborhood wanted, hoped maybe to be motor mechanics or carpenters and bricklayers.

Harris: What kind of a neighborhood was it then?

Mathews: It was a very working class neighborhood. The township called Silvertown, unique in many ways. It is one of the few townships on the Cape flats that's predominately English speaking. A very well serviced neighborhood, in that there were a number of schools, primary and high schools, swimming pools, there was a cinema close by.

Alex: Did you ever face removals in your childhood?

Mathews: I was born in town, in what's now called Malay Quarters. And we were moved out from there, to this council Township

Alex: And that was not a voluntary move?

Mathews: It was Semi-voluntary, in that the choices, one did not really have the choice, we were not evicted, but the condition of the house was not satisfactory and there was no way the council would improve the housing stock. So that they waited for the houses to fall down around peoples ears. In that way, they would voluntarily move out. But I was about five or six when we moved. I would imagine the most important years of my life were in Council Township in Silvertown.

Alex: How early on, given your fathers friends, how early on were you aware of the racial situation in this country. Does that awareness date from your early childhood, or later on.?

Mathew: Yeah, well I was aware right from the beginning because it was a crucial topic in the house most of the time. My father, if one should accurately describe his politics, he's an old fashioned liberal. I think very few people will accept that. But I think that is true. He believes that essentially that people are people and that there are good people and bad people and their color is not really an issue. Which meant that when I was a bit older and started becoming politically active, that was our fight. My formative years I was fairly black conscious, radically Black Conscious. I grew up in the house where non-racialism was preached.

Yeah, right from the beginning, it was obvious that there was something strange, mainly because of the way colored neighbors would react to my fathers friends, to people who I regarded as friends. Whites coming to the house, or blacks and there was always a curiosity about Orientals. You know, all the prejudice about people from the East and the, my father had a friend who was Chinese, who we were extremely close to, in that he, he took us out a lot, to the beach up the mountain, a great outdoor type. But the kids in the neighborhood would not come near to him because you know "the Chinese eat children." So it was all that kind of thing, from childhood. Also, the way people would respond to the whites who came to the house: with respect, servitude, that sort of nonsense. And whereas we were through our experience knew them to be just people who

sometimes shit as well. And then one could say that one was encouraged to say that.

Yeah but, as a child that was not the world I wanted to, be part of you know. And I spent a lot of time in the cinemas to escape. I think from my environment, also to get out of the house, quite often just to get away from my old man, go to the movies. I have a brother younger than me who is a musician. A sister who is married to a priest. She is even more conventional than what I am. And a kid brother who is at university now. Well he has not been on campus for the better part of this year. But he's a drummer as well.

Alex: You've spent most of your life in Cape Town. Was the university here the first time you went to school with whites as well?

Mathews: Yes but I sort of grew up in the latter stages of hippidom. And in the late sixties and early seventies, there was a small, there was a possibility to imitate San Francisco and wherever people were preaching free love and friendship. And so even before going to university, there was the possibility just to have whites as friends or contemporaries or people my age, rather than my fathers friends or the kids of my fathers. And so then the university was not such a problem.

There were problems, you know, I loved the movies and one could never discuss the movies with white students because we'd have to wait three to six months before the movies came onto our circuit. So if you got excited about a movie, you could not discuss it with someone you were close to because they seen it six months ago and probably forgotten it. And they, you know. It was kind of.

Alex: When did you come away from the idea of architecture to film and audio-visual?

Mathews: Quite early, at the later stages of my high school while I was at high school, I became very aware of the fact that I didn't have the intellectual capacity to actually pursue a career in architecture or anything else as ambitious as that. My high school career was not a happy one. I wanted to get out of school as quickly as I could. And when I went to the university, I went to do a liberal arts degree which would not have qualified me to do anything really, not even certain that it expanded my mind anymore. Even that was not a good experience for me because it was such an artificial, and still is, a very artificial environment.

One goes up on that hill and you can pretend to be a human being for eight hours of the day and then you go back to the ghetto. Or weekends you spend with friends in the ghetto, and you start acquiring the language of intellectuals, and this creates an enormous gap between you and your community -- a gap which still exists for me quite often. And so I didn't go to the university to do architecture. I basically went to the university because it was something my father expected of us. We were allowed enormous amounts of freedom growing up and then he made very few demands of us. One of the demands was that we stay at school. I mean, that he was quite adamant about. The

other, if it was possible to do it, to at least go, if we dropped out of school, that's cool, but to at least go there. He had not had much schooling; he hadn't been to high school at all. I think he, he strongly believes that if he had gone to high school, maybe even university, he would have been a better writer. I am sure about that.

Alex: So, when did you get involved with photography?

Mathew: On leaving the university, I always wanted to say something about what is going on in this country. And, I thought that journalism would be a good way to do that. The first job interview I went to, went for, was as a journalist. And the first question the guy asked me was, "Do you write as well as your father." And because I was young and extremely angry at the time, and also I didn't like me father so much at the time either. You know, I told him to fuck off and left and I was very angry. I was still at Varisty then.

And the other thing that I would have loved to have done is paint, but I can't paint too well. And the one thing that my father can't do at all, is operate anything mechanical. And, I started messing around with the camera, initially, I think, more, because I wanted to say something, and say something in a medium that could not be associated readily with my father. But then I started working for him. He was the editor of the newspaper at the time -- Muslim News. I was working as a photographer. But once I started taking pictures, when I started taking pictures I realized actually that I had in fact, found a way of communicating. And yeah, to a large extent, I taught myself, as I went along, from books, from speaking to other photographers. I got a lot of support from older guys, who..... a lot of people told me to do social work in photography was insane. But nonetheless I got a lot of support. People gave me cameras when I needed cameras.

Alex: So that was the way that you would describe your work, in the social documentary genre?

Mathews: yes.

Alex: And what sorts of things did you work on initially?

Mathews: Initially, I didn't actually understand what I was doing. I spent a lot of time in the area where I was born because they were tearing down the houses then. Most of my free time I spent there making dreadful photographs. But photographing the neighborhood as it was being torn down. Photographing old people, because somehow I saw a relationship between the buildings that were being torn down and these people who were going to die very soon. For about two or three years, I just... most of my pictures were on the street. Besides the stuff that I did as a journalist, I have never been employed full time as a photographer. For a long time now I've made a living through photography. But I have never, its still an ambition to get a job on a newspaper. It is what I want to do. I would like to work on a newspaper that likes photographers. There are not many newspapers like that anymore. But, I yeah, right from the beginning I started freelancing and.

Alex: In your mind, what is your role as a documentary photographer?

I think there are a few. That there are a number of different functions that social documentary photography can fulfill. A lot of our contemporary history has been obliterated by the brazen power structure. I think that it is necessary for us as photographers, writers, whoever, to document what this government is doing to people, to try and establish archives one could use later on as reference, to provide reference material so people would be better equipped and need certainly to try and understand what this government has done to people in this country. That is on one level. On the other I make no apology for the fact that a lot of my pictures are used for overt political purposes. As a means of propaganda, and I don't regard the term propaganda to be negative or I think it has a lot of positive connotations. And I don't believe anyone can be objective. I am quite passionate about that. Even to claim that one is neutral is a position as far as I am concerned.

Alex: Well who is the enemy here? Are you saying the enemy is part of your own country?

I think the enemy is largely those people who occupy the world who deem it upon themselves that they have the right to determine what functions people should or should not have the right to perform. The immediate enemy for me is the power structure in this country and not only government, but, to a large extent, the capitalist system that makes this government function in the way that it does. And to a large extent, all those repressive regimes internationally that restrict free and the unlimited development of the people.

Harris: How successful in your mind has the system been, the Apartheid System been in terms of its goal to keep people separate in this country.

For me, one of the most successful things and the worst thing that this system has done, besides successfully keeping people apart, besides defining people in little categories, even within the black community, keeping the black community separated, the worst thing that it has done, is the level of prejudice it has managed to inculcate in a number of people.

An example, for instance, two weeks ago, three weeks ago, we were filming in the center of town, some disturbance in the center of town, and we were filming this. And the police turned on the media and we were thrashed in the streets, shamboked. And the comments from whites on the street was, "Well you know you shouldn't be whipped, you should be shot." Throughout the day while we were working, one got comments like "scum" and shit like that.

Alex: Was that the kind of thing you heard all your life growing up or is it more since you've been involved with the media?

Mathew: No, growing up, one was meant to know one's place. Growing up

in the way I did, one sometimes had problems, just related to one's sense of dignity, where you were expected to bow or be civil, or respect someone else's color -- which was something I couldn't do.

Yeah, we have all kinds of crazy experiences now. And I have an assistant, who is my assistant because he is competent, because he is hard working. We have a good relationship. We have an understanding of what we are doing. But he also happens to have blond hair and grey eyes, and he is classified white, and people, because we carry around a camera that has the BBC logo on the sides, people often assumed that we are not local that we are foreigners. And so an Afrikaan, one often hears the comment, "He should be ashamed of himself to be working with a black. Isn't he embarrassed for carry the recorder which is an enormous weight? Isn't he embarrassed of taking instructions for me?" You know in 1985 we have that kind of bullshit.

Alex: Given those kind of attitudes, something we were talking about last night, attitudes that are drilled into people from childhood, what hope do you see of a photograph or film changing things? You say you take photographs for a political purpose, do you think there is hope that those images can change attitudes?

Mathew: Yeah, I think that what we are experiencing in this country now, what one certain started noticing round about ... Well, I wasn't in the country in the early 80's, but I came back from Europe. I I lived in Europe for a few years, and I came back in '82, towards the end of '82. And I detected a political consciousness, across barriers, which culminated in the formation of UDF. And more and more one sees up to very recently, the possibility of organizing on the mass level, not quite across barriers, or across the white barriers, but certainly across, there are very few barriers that still exist in the black community. And more and more whites are being recognized as being part of the struggle for liberation in this country. More and more one sees people committed to change, publically expressing that commitment, and through imagery, photographs and film, one can popularize that notion.

Part of my subjective motive is that there is no way that I can photograph black people who are down. I can see no purpose for me to photograph black people who are down. If they are not strong in the image, I won't show them. As a journalist, I write as well, it took me a number of years to actually get over that problem of writing and having my writing compared to my fathers. But as a writer, as well, there is no way I will do an assignment that will knock the black community. I would rather not write it. Which is not to say that black is right, and that it is not okay to be white. It is just that there are enough people around to actually put down blacks and I don't want to add to that.

Alex: As a South African who is very aware of the foreign media, give me your view of this country versus people who come in from the outside to photograph?

Mathew: I think it's very similar to my experiences in going to Europe. One of the things that struck me and made a hell of an

impression on me, was the level of poverty in Europe, not only material poverty, but cultural poverty. I was not prepared for that. I also found quite unconsciously that I was photographing, the first few months in Europe I was photographing workers a lot. That was not strange because I had photographed workers in this country before I left. It took me a while to realize that the workers I was photographing were whites doing menial jobs. Another thing that, I certainly had not seen here, I knew that it actually happens in most other countries, and I didn't sort of stop in the streets and say, "My god, there is a white man digging in a ditch." But in a sense I did. I photographed that. It took me quite a while to sort of work through it.

And my experience with foreigners coming here. Because professionally, the people I work with invariably are foreigners who come here with very fixed notions of what this country is like. They expect political activists to be active twenty-four hours a day. When I say that I still like Bob Dylan or, you know, that occasionally we have parties, they are astonished because we are suppose to be in the midst of a revolution and activists are suppose to be planning a revolution.

Alex: That brings up a whole other issue, which we've discussed with the other photographers, the preasure that you feel. For instance you told me you want to paint. Would people consider that frivolous. Do you feel that kind of pressure as someone who considers himself an artist as well as a photographer?

Yeah, but I have gotten to the point were I can say, "To hell with that". To hell with people who think that the fact that I quite often buy my wife flowers, the fact that she buys me flowers. I think in the past it might have bothered me a bit, it certainly doesn't bother me now. And it doesn't bother me because I don't have problems with my credibility. And I think people who feel insecure about the fact that they can't photograph trees or flowers or butterflies or rainbows. (I have never successful photographed a rainbow. I have tried it quite often) You know, they, I don't know. I think they just have problems with their own credibility as people, as political people. I think if you are secure in what you are doing, then you know, you should be free to do the things that excite you. That should not be interpreted as being free to do as you please. I don't think in this country anyone is free to do as they please. I think there is too much going on in this country. I think that too many people are being killed. I am not trying to be dramatic. In the past several months, one has witnessed people being killed. One has spoken to the parents of children who are in prison. So I don't believe anyone has the right to do as they please.

I think that, to qualify in my mind, to qualify as a person, you actually have to be doing something to change this country. And on a scale to one to ten, that is how I rate people. If they are not committed to change in this country, or whatever country they find themselves in. You know, we could spend a bit of time together. We won't spend a hell of time together. So I don't have a big social circle, yet, but I think that more and more people are committing themselves to change. And so my social circle will proportionally

increase. But yeah, I think people should be free to, you know, I listen to the Beatles, I was angry with McCarthy's saying what he said about Lennon. I was just angry.

Alex: That could be a real example of the paper grabbing on to one statement made out of a whole interview and making something big out of it, because I can't see him being that vindictive.

Mathew: When I was just angry now, when I started actually listening to music, to popular music, I was about 15, 16. I was then embarrassed to say that I liked the Beatles. The lost poets...Harry Belafonte, yes, no matter what shit Stevie Wonder churns out, yes, Gladys Knight and the Pips. The Beatles, no, Dylan, no anyone right, no. Well maybe Dylan yes, Dylan sang about social issues. But, certainly not little love songs. I can't sing, but sometimes I'm in love. I don't know, I think people...you know, what we are fighting for in this country, is also the right to express oneself freely. So when you deny someone the possibility of photographing trees, you....

Alex: What then do you think this Carnegie project, was a group effort by twenty South African photographers, what was the significance of that project.

Personally, one could disagree on that. The Carnegie Exhibition was an exciting exhibition. It wasn't culturally an important exhibition. The "Culture and Resistance Exhibition" in Botswana, for instance, was a hell of a lot more important. The shortcoming was that the people who should have seen that exhibition didn't. But what came out of Botswana was an urge by a number of people inside the country to do things collectively, to work together, to deal with the problems in this country from a cultural place, cultural base. But Botswana only happened because already the seeds for that kind of expression were sown in the seventies.

In the seventies, we saw the beginning of culture for resistance where people went out in the community halls and read poems, photographers, not sure what they were doing, were asked to stick up pictures. I remember sticking up my pictures in a community hall while a few people read poems, and a few musicians experimented with song and music. And coming back in the evening and discovering that three or four of the prints had been stolen and feeling reasonably proud because it meant that someone actually like the pictures. And then all over the country, the little groups got together and they started exhibiting paintings, graphics, photographs. And I think the biggest event of that nature was Botswana.

Incidentally, I was ask to film the Botswana Festival. But I was living in London then and I came to Cape Town because I heard that there was a bus leaving from Cape Town to Botswana. And because I had been out of the country for almost five years, it was necessary for me to come home to speak to a few people, to sort out what people were thinking, get onto the bus to go, spend two or three days on the bus talking to people, spend two or three days there and make a decent movie. What happened was that I got home and then the next day they took my passport. Everyone else got on the bus, and I remained behind. I

didn't make the film.

But then someone, an artist who I love a lot, read a paper that I had written the night before the bus left. But I think that Botswana was a lot more important than the Carnegie Exhibition. Carnegie, the shortcomings of Carnegie was that it was held under the auspices of an academic umbrella. It was put on at the university where it is not accessible to the community. The people who saw the exhibition were mainly, the exhibition was a side show at the Carnegie Conference. And the exhibition competed against other side shows on the campus at the time.

What is important is that you reinforced the notion of collective work. What one would have liked to have seen for that exhibition was to actually travel into the community.

Alex: That is what is happening now. It will open in Johannesburg in March and travel throughout the country for a couple of years.

You know, and to try, it's difficult. We've tried it. I work in a group called BaKalisa and we do this fairly successfully. But the problem, it seems, that with exhibitions of the nature of the Carnegie Exhibition is, for instance, one says it will open up in the Market Gallery.

Alex: No, actually it will open in Soweto.

And then that is what one wants to see, and not not, and if it does open up in Soweto, it should not open at the Funda Center or whatever. But really it should be taken into libraries, or a day, three days, five days, community halls. And this is happening. We, a lot of our time in BaKalisa is spent taking art, whatever way one wants to define art, to the community. And within our group one is not denied the right, for example, to exhibit in the city galleries because we accept that people have to sell their work to live, and one does not expect to sell work in the ghettos.

Alex: What did you mean when you said there was a gap between you and the community, was that because you had been educated and been outside?

Mathews: As children, we were not allowed to speak Afrikaans. And its, and it might mean something in the context that in '76 and the whole Soweto uprising, also revolved around the issue of Afrikaans. My father never explained to us, for instance, as children that we were not allowed to speak Afrikaans because it was the language of the oppressor. He never explained that. But one understands now that those were his motives. We were not allowed for instance to have a radio in our house because the radio is a tool for government propaganda, again something he didn't bother to explain. And the first radio we actually got was one day, when he came out of prison, and the period that he had been in prison they were allowed to have radios, and the red cross had bought him a radio so that he came keep up in prison with it.

But yeah, the problem for me, because it does not exist for my brother who is a musician, is that we were encouraged to read at a very early age. We were taught to read at a very early age. Our reading was selected by my father. We were not allowed to read comics. He had a lot of very strange and weird ideas about our intellectual growth, very bourgeois. But he did inculcate in us a love for words. And so, because we were expected to talk about matters of intellectual importance, it became more and more difficult as I grew up to actually speak to people in the community about issues that they thought were important.

My family, both my father's brothers and sisters and my mother's are Afrikaans speaking. I don't speak, I speak Afrikaans if I try, but not naturally. So they and, English for a long time was regarded as the language of intellectuals. So even within my family we are thought to be snobs because we speak English. And its a big problem. It has taken me a long time to actually admit that: that there are people who I grew up with who I love, who I respect, who I want to be close to, who for some reason I can't get close to because they regard my preference for English as being an indication of snobbery.

And the fact that I live a reasonably simple life, in their minds, is just a facade, it is all part of this image. But I found through a photograph, for instance, I could at least breach that gap, by giving people pictures -- photographing people in the neighborhood, photographing families, and giving them copies. And in that way, getting them to understand that while they may not accept or understand why I speak English rather than Afrikaans, the reason that I am taking pictures is not to put them down, because I am not ashamed of where I come from.