

Passion Points: Giving Back



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Well Souled South Africa was born from what its creator Mital Shah refers to as a “coffee shop moment.” In the fall of 2007, following her mentor’s death to AIDS, Shah met a close friend at a café in NYC’s West Village. The friend advised Shah—a Boston native working as an executive at Vera Wang—to find a way “to mix the ingredients that mattered.” Shah heeded this advice and one year later came out with *Well Souled South Africa*, a beautiful, linen bound book that charts a six-month journey she took through South Africa. The book, which weaves together stunning photographs, interviews with tastemakers and

trendsetters as well as Shah’s own personal reflections, is an exploration of South African style in all its various forms and locations, from the high-end boutiques to the lesser known shantytown stores. It’s also a philanthropic project: 20% of its profits go to organizations helping AIDS orphans. In terms of the creative process, Shah’s modus operandi was to keep everything as open as possible and to let the project develop in its own way: she started talking with a few friends of friends who introduced her to others, who in turn introduced her to their friends, etc. This unplanned “thread of conversation” as she calls it led her to locales like rugby clubs, dive bars, hair salons and vineyards and accounts for some of the book’s more unexpected content including song lyrics and special recipes. According to Shah, *Well-Souled South Africa* “is more an experience than a book and is meant to set the tone for a much bigger, broader vision.” In the future, this vision will encompass a line of lifestyle products—scarves, luggage tags, CDs, etc.—that are inspired from Shah’s travels. Similar books for India, Brazil, Vietnam are already in the works and a portion of all will go to various social initiatives (for India, which is where Shah’s family is from, she plans to concentrate all charitable efforts on rural education; in Brazil, the focus is the environment). *Copies of Well Souled South Africa are available at www.wellsouled.com and at select stores like Rizzoli Bookstore and Anthropologie.* [Read an interview with Mital Shah.](#)

[Kathleen M. McKenna](#) 03/03/2008

Passion Points: Style



Hot Pink, in Jaipur; courtesy of Marie H el ene de Taillac


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Mital Shah, a former fashion executive at Vera Wang, discusses her new book, [Well Souled South Africa](#), an exploration of South African style. Her company, which is planning future books on fashion in India, Brazil, Vietnam and Turkey, as well as a line of lifestyle products (including scarves, luggage tags and CDs) inspired from the countries Shah visits, donates 20% of the book's sales to organizations helping AIDS orphans.

You have said that *Well Souled* draws much of its inspiration from “organic exploration.” How did this type of travel shape your journey in South Africa? Intrinsic to

this organic exploration is following where people lead you and being open to the access point they are offering you into their culture. For example: I was invited by a friend of a friend to a birthday party, where I met a woman working in the South African fashion industry, who later introduced me to one of the country's most prominent make-up artists, who, on a Monday night, took me to one of the most vibrant, stylish street parties I've ever experienced. The location was in an Alexandra township, which is generally known for its crime and poverty. It was the perfect example that style lives everywhere and is limited only by your imagination, not by how much money you have. How I got to that street party – that is what *Well Souled* is about.

Who are some of the people you interviewed for *Well Souled South Africa*? I met with a variety of people in fields from fashion and music to sports and food and wine. They ranged from high-profile artists and athletes who are presenting their works on the world stage—designers like **Nkhensani Nkosi** of **Stoned Cherrie** (www.stonedcherrie.co.za) and **Gavin Rajah** (www.gavinrajah.co.za); the band **Freshly Ground** (www.gavinrajah.co.za), the Kwaito musician **Kabelo** and the canoeing champion **Michael Mbanjwa**—to those who stood out from the crowd for their “street” style and the associated grassroots influence.

How would you describe style in South Africa in comparison to that in the U.S. and Europe? There are so many layers and nuances to South African style. One particular thing I observed is an attempt by designers to bridge indigenous fabrics and elements with contemporary constructions that transcend any one ethnicity. Fashion in South Africa continues to be influenced by history and current events and is still a medium for telling stories and making social statements. But it is also growing and evolving towards the more conceptual references, subtle detailing and intricate techniques that are so popular with US and European fashion designers today.

How have global fashions influenced the stylistic expression of the people you encountered in South Africa? South Africa is a melting pot of global cultures each of which have contributed to the country's fashion identity over time. You will see draping inspired by Indian saris and the famous shweshwe cloth whose unique patterns are from Dutch and British mills. In the past, I was told by many that the Italians had inspired women's silhouettes and the "gangster" look came straight from African-American culture. Today you still see a strong presence of hip-hop and Indian cultures, among others, but always twisted into a South African way. There is a real love for fusing... for weaving influences together. South Africa was, thus, an ideal place to begin the Well Souled journey.

Do you have any really great South African designers or stores to recommend? I am a fan of small boutiques in tucked-away places, the ones you have to seek out or else you will never find. And so I would recommend the **44 Stanley** (*44 Stanley Ave., Milpark; (27 11)482-1082; www.44stanley.co.za*) complex in Johannesburg—particularly the Lunar store there—as well as the boutiques in **De Waterkant** and on **Kloof Street** in **Cape Town's** city center. Also, the **Space** (*Rosebank, Johannesburg; (27 11) 327-3640*) is a fashion-forward group of stores that many of the local stylists scour for new trends and ideas – definitely a must!

You've said this trip has broadened your definition of style? How so? The idea that style has a very broad definition is an idea I came to understand over the years as I traveled to new places and met new people. This specific journey, to South Africa, reinforced that understanding and was also an opportunity to articulate it to others. Style is about many things but in its simplest form, style is about expression. It is about how you communicate your individuality to the world.

Was there one moment on your journey you found particularly inspiring? One of our photo shoots led us to a support center for children orphaned by AIDS. The children were initially very shy and spoke to us in a quiet, rehearsed way. We encouraged them to let loose, to not be afraid or nervous to be themselves, and soon enough they were relaxed and playful. Once they saw the camera (and it was one of those big professional cameras with the long lenses), they began to make faces and gestures and generally enjoy the moment. Two girls suddenly began to walk up and down as if they were on a catwalk at a fashion show, looking straight into the camera, flicking their hair and striking poses from time to time. The scene moved me to tears, to just see how "style" manifests itself in even the most difficult of circumstances. I believe that people are inherently optimistic and hopeful and this moment captured the very essence of that.

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