



OLD WEST, NEW GROUND: Ride along with Cape Town band Congo Cowboys as they head to East London for two shows — Thursday night and Friday night. Picture: SUPPLIED.

# When country music meets the Congo

**Cape Town band to treat East London audiences to fresh sounds**

ROSA-KAROO LOEWE

"There is some cowboy attire, and less is more when it comes to Chris, we keep wanting him to get his shirt off!"

Google the name "Congo Cowboys", and immediately a sultry image of lead singer Chris Bakalanga pops up, dreadlocks cascading from underneath a brown Stetson hat, an open kaftan revealing his bare chest. Band members Simon Atwell, Julio Sigauque, Anthon Mannel and Congolese singer Bakalanga have embraced the aesthetic and sounds of the American West, blending banjo twangs with Kwassa Kwassa rhythms.

Hitting the road this week for East London, the Congo Cowboys have prepared two shows for the metro — an acoustic, intimate session on Thursday and a vibey jol on Friday night.

"I'm 45 and still pretending to be a cowboy!" band member Atwell said.

Formed in 2016, they were eager to showcase their music beyond the Western Cape.

"We are feeling really good about coming."

"We've performed in Europe and Zimbabwe but never ventured further than Cape Town, not even Joburg."

Inaugural trio Atwell, Sigau-

que and Bakalanga were former members of one of SA's breakthrough groups, Freshlyground, whose mainstream hit *Waka Waka*, performed alongside Shakira, was the biggest earworm of 2010.

"People don't really know what to expect when they see [the name] Congo Cowboys."

"We had people in Europe come up to us and say 'I just want to tell you guys that was better than I expected.'"

"We've been honing our live show for a few years and have a cracker 90-minute set [prepared]."

"We start off with a slow introduction to the instruments and what we are doing — interpreting songs originally sung by slaves from the Congo. From there it climbs and builds in momentum until everyone is dancing and having a jol."

Congolese singer Bakalanga weaves English and Lingala through each song, the band's cover of Dolly Parton's *Jolene*, a showstopper on AppleTV's *My Kind of Country* reality music show produced by Reese Witherspoon.

"People should come with their dancing shoes and listen to something different."

Atwell picked up the cowboy aesthetic and banjo in 2007 after a trip to Nashville, US.

"I came home with a banjo, some boots and a cowboy hat. I wore the boots but never touched the banjo until 2016."

"I decided to teach myself and started to learn Americana, playing around with Chris and Julian."

"We started jamming trying to find out how we could create an African interpretation of Americana music, and Chris could sing really well in Lingala."

"The cowboy boots, the hats and the banjo — we thought 'lets play off this cowboy idea.'"

"He's from the Congo, it was quite a cool name."

In the 1950s, a subculture within the Congolese youth discovered the Old American West through film, and its leading man Buffalo Bill.

"It was only when I started doing a bit of research [I found] there were gangs in the 1950s called the Congo Cowboys modelled after baseball teams."

"They dressed in the fashion of 1950s Westerns, they were hard-core gangsters."

Though their careers explod-

ed as Freshlyground members, Atwell said this did not help them gain traction in the industry.

"We've had to work quite hard to get recognition to break into the scene."

"It obviously not that straightforward but when you are singing in Lingala and playing a genre of music mixing country and African — we don't get radio play and we've had to almost build it by word of mouth."

"When it comes to a new band you need to prove yourself. We had to start again."

"I think that people should take a chance [on us]. If you want to have a really good time, come out and see us."

When events co-organiser Cheryl Minkley from Nahoon Reef Productions saw them perform, she knew East Londoners would love them live.

"I'm so stoked they are coming here and that we managed

to make this happen. I hope everyone there will enjoy it — I can't wait!"

The weekend is split into two events, an acoustic session at the Kitchen Table in collaboration with the Alliance Francaise of East London (Anfel) on Thursday night, and a vibey jol at the Old Selbournian Club on Friday.

"I hope that Friday will be a happy end-of-the-year party, with people experiencing something they've never heard before."

On Thursday, the Congo Cowboys Acoustic Session will be at The Kitchen Table, Berea. Tickets cost R230 including dinner and R130 without dinner. For non-members it is R250 including dinner and R130 without dinner.

On Friday, the Congo Cowboys will perform at the Old Selbournian Club from 7.30pm. Tickets cost R150, to be purchased at the Kitchen Table or Old Selbournians. Contact: 082-660-658

# East Cape author wins literary award for isiXhosa poetry book

ANELISA GUSHA

Eastern Cape-born lecturer and author Anelisa Thengimfene has added another feather to her distinguished cap after winning a South African Literary Award for her poetry book, *Amajingqihw' Entlalo* (Life's Ups and Downs).

The awards pay tribute to South African writers who have made an impact in telling SA's stories through literature and art.

Her poetry book explores different themes including gender-based violence and other social issues.

An isiXhosa lecturer at SANTS Private Higher Education Institution in Pretoria, Thengimfene said she wrote the book to preserve her culture and language.

Born in Ngamakwe, she holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Walter Sisulu University.

She completed her BA honours degree at Nelson Mandela University and is studying for her master's in African Languages through Unisa.

She said when she began penning the book she never anticipated it would get the recog-

niton it has received. "I wrote this book in late October 2021 and published it in early 2022."

"I am incredibly humbled by these achievements. 'I never thought that my craft would receive such recognition.'"

Thengimfene said her love for the language was the reason behind the book.

"Initially, I didn't consider myself an author. 'I simply had a deep love for isiXhosa.'"

"In 2017, I met Dr Yolisa Madolo, my former lecturer at Walter Sisulu University."

"She was involved in a poetry project with other lecturers and encouraged me to write poems."

She said Madolo saw her potential and that motivated her to start writing.

"I underestimated myself, but she insisted that I had the skill and offered to review my work before submission."

"Her feedback fuelled my passion, and I kept writing."

"My skills continued to develop, and she frequently invited me to writers' events."

"I began entering poetry competitions, and my poems were

selected for anthologies." Winning awards is nothing foreign to the author.

"I even won a highly competitive poetry contest by Via African in 2018."

Thengimfene said she was grateful to be chosen.

"When SALA released information about nominated books, with over 200 books submitted, I was so surprised and grateful that my book made it to the select few."

"I was so happy to win this award."

The language activist said preserving language was essential because it retained the cultural and historical identity of a community.

"Language connects people to their roots and heritage, and it's a vital part of their identity."

"When a language is preserved, it ensures that the unique stories and knowledge passed down through generations are not lost."

"It also promotes diversity and inclusivity."

"As an activist, I believe that language preservation is a way of safeguarding the richness of culture and promoting a sense of belonging for future generations," Thengimfene said.



CELEBRATING TALENT: Anelisa Thengimfene poses with her South African Literary Award, which she won for her poetry book, *Amajingqihw' Entlalo*. Picture: SUPPLIED

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