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South African Township Barbershops and Salons

By Simon Weller



Housed in shacks and shipping containers, with hair clippers wired to car batteries, South African township barbershops and “street salons” are incredibly popular. With names like King Tiger’s Hair Clinique, Ghetto Hair Salon, Hollywood Barbershop, and Homeboys Haircut, shops attract customers with hand-painted signs whose distinctive vernacular style has as much to do with art as marketing. In the new book *South African Township Barbershops and Salons*, Simon Weller documents the thriving, little-known art of barbershop signage and explains this integral part of the culture of South Africa.

Weller’s book pairs interviews with shop owners, customers, and sign artists with vivid photographs of barbershop exteriors and interiors, creating a portrait of the strong community and continuing political and social struggle inherent in township life. Lucky, a barber, explains the importance of barbershops: “It is a place where you can discuss the game that was played last night while you are waiting. We talk about a mixture of things that happen in our lives—politics, girls, cars, soccer, and movies.”

Artists, with a range of backgrounds and influences, are frequently asked to paint contemporary characters from American culture, particularly black stars like Tupac and Snoop Dogg, as well as pictures of specialty haircuts. Sign artist and designer Garth Walker, who is interviewed in *South African Township Barbershops and Salons*, describes the style of barbershop design and why it should be celebrated: “We like it because it looks good and it makes you feel good and that's what graphic design is supposed to do. There is no concept, it's just joyous. That is the bedrock of the African approach to just about everything, if you like it, do it.”

Photographer **Simon Weller** is represented by Corbis and Getty Images, and his client list includes an array of high-profile international companies, including Airstream, Channel 4 Television, Columbia Records, Penguin Books, Tate Gallery, Toyota, and *Wired* magazine.

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Simon Weller

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