THE CONVERSATION
Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Rashid Lombard captured South Africa's struggle and the complexity of freedom.

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The click of a camera shutter and the improvisation of a jazz saxophone may seem worlds apart. Yet, in the hands of South African photojournalist and cultural organiser Rashid Lombard, they became inseparable instruments of resistance and celebration.

Born in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) in 1951, Lombard began his journey as a photographer during one of the most turbulent periods in South African history. He documented pivotal moments in the country's journey towards democracy, including the release of former president Nelson Mandela in 1990 and South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994.

I am an African Studies scholar working at the intersection of creativity, memory and restorative justice. His work came into sharp focus when I conceptualised and curated the exhibition Martyrs, Saints and Sellouts: The Photographs of Benny Gool, Adil Bradlow and Zubeida Vallie in 2013.

Rashid's death at age 74 marks the end of a life that synced visual documentation of struggle with devotion to the music that sustained – and critically examined – what came after.

The journey of a photographer

Like so many in South Africa, Lombard's childhood was shattered by the impact of the Group Areas Act of 1950 that segregated South Africans by race. It eviscerated his multicultural boyhood. In 1962, when he was 11, his family relocated to Cape Town.

After completing his schooling, he first trained as an architectural draughtsman before moving into industrial photography, beginning his career at a large construction company. He would become a respected photojournalist.

His camera became a witness, capturing not just the dramatic moments of political upheaval, but the humanity of ordinary people living under extraordinary oppression. He photographed for leading global media agencies and also for local anti-apartheid publications like Grassroots and South.

If pressed, I would say that my favourite image of his is the one of fellow South African photographer Ernest Cole. The composition demonstrates masterful visual doubling (in a mirror) that illuminates both Cole's life and photography's fundamental nature.

This intimate behind-the-scenes image reveals masculine vulnerability – not just Cole's, but potentially Lombard's own exposure. Lombard's achievement lies in capturing this profoundly personal moment between friends. He documents their kinship and connection, a shield against apartheid's brutality.

Many other famous South Africans would be captured in his lens –Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Chris Hani, and Dumile Feni. But he more often dwelled on everyday people.

Lombard worked alongside photographers like Benny Gool, Jimi Matthews, Willie de Klerk and Zubeida Vallie, whose contributions were often overshadowed by white contemporaries. Gool documented the liberation struggle with intimate knowledge of the communities he photographed. Vallie, possibly the only Black woman photographing the struggle years in Cape Town, brought unique sensitivity to documenting resistance.

Jazz champion

What distinguished Lombard from even these contemporaries was his understanding that the struggle for freedom extended beyond the political realm, into the cultural. Where jazz music thrived.

During the 1980s, as Black residential areas called townships burned and international sanctions tightened, jazz clubs and homes became sanctuaries. Here South Africans could express their humanity through music.

Lombard captured the musicians and their struggles, decades later publishing his photo book Jazz Rocks. He founded an events company in 1997 and established the important Cape Town International Jazz Festival in 2000.

A rich legacy

What emerges from Lombard's body of work is a profound understanding of interconnectedness. Between art and politics, between individual expression and collective liberation, between the click of a shutter and the rhythm of a bass line.

His photographs capture not just what happened, but what it felt like to live through the transformation of a nation. They show us jazz musicians and protest marchers as performers in democracy's great improvisation, and ordinary moments as extraordinary acts of defiance.

For the archive of the anti-apartheid struggle, Lombard's contributions represent something beyond mere documentation. They constitute a visual testimony to both the dream of freedom and its complex, often painful unrealisation.

His later images reveal the euphoria of liberation alongside the sobering recognition that political freedom would not automatically translate into economic justice or social equality.

In documenting both the struggle and its aftermath, Lombard's rich archive – including over 500,000 film negatives – becomes a meditation.

His photographs ask uncomfortable questions. What does liberation mean when poverty persists? How do we measure progress when cultural expression remains undervalued? They remind us that revolution can be both the raised fist and the

extended saxophone, both the protest chant and the syncopated rhythm that makes our hips sway in hope.

Rashid Lombard's legacy lies in his recognition that freedom has many expressions. And that its struggle extends far beyond political emancipation.

He is survived by his partner Colleen and children Chevan, Shadley, Yana, Zach and Daniel. They shared not only his life but the sacrifices that apartheid demanded. *Hamba kahle* (Go well) Rashid. We mourn you through your photographs which remind us of your life, one lived in the pursuit of justice, art and truth.

Reference:

O'Connell, S. (Professor). Rashid Lombard: the photographer who documented both resistance and celebration in South Africa, *The Conversation*, 5 June 2025 [online]. Available at https://theconversation.com . Accessed 6 June 20025