

Tony Allen (1940-2020): Pioneering drummer of Afrobeat dies

By Paul Bond
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Few drummers have played such a key role in creating a musical genre and style as Tony Allen. The Nigerian drummer, who died of an aneurysm aged 79 in Paris, where he lived, was the percussive genius behind Afrobeat. His long-time pioneering collaborator Fela Kuti (1938-1997), the famed Nigerian musician and composer, once declared “without Tony Allen, there would be no Afrobeat.”

Tony Oladipo Allen was born in Lagos in 1940, the son of an auto mechanic. Having learned electronics he worked as a radio technician in his teens, which enabled him to repair band amplifiers when he did become a musician. Astonishingly, he did not take up the drums until he was 18, inspired by modern jazz.

A later collaborator, Sébastien Tellier, said this led him to “a very mysterious way to play drums.” Having learned by himself, without lessons, he “created another way to play.” Within four months of taking up the drums he announced he wanted to be a musician.

Allen grew up listening to local West African music and immersed himself in jazz. His great contribution was bringing the two genres together. Allen described Afrobeat as “a fusion of beats and patterns. There was highlife [a popular West African music incorporating foreign rhythms and Western instruments], there was local Yoruba music like *apala* and *s akara*, there was jazz, and there was Western popular music like funk and R&B.”

He listened carefully to the jazz greats, studying Art Blakey and Max Roach above all. Blakey’s influence was huge, and Allen paid tribute to him in a four-track tribute EP in 2017. Allen described Blakey—in words that could also be applied to himself—as a magician because his playing sounded like more than one person on the drums. Indeed, when Allen finally left Kuti’s band, it took four percussionists to replace him!

In the jazz drummers he listened to, Allen heard an overall approach as well as technical skills. They were, he said, “telling a story by playing different rhythms, and they were doing it with independent coordination. That’s the way the drums should be played.” His approach was to follow “one central idea,” while allowing his limbs to play four independent lines and patterns on the drum kit. “You listen to it flowing like a river,” he said.

Allen’s focus on that one idea enabled him to be a flexible and constantly developing centrepiece of a band’s sound. Martín Perna, of Brooklyn-based Afrobeat group Antibalas, said that “with all that variation, he’s somehow more hypnotic than a pattern that doesn’t change.”

This ability to create four independent lines enabled him to cultivate a swinging polyrhythm. Roach’s playing got him interested in the hi-hat, which he thought overlooked in African drumming and which became central to his playing.

The Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo, who recorded often with him, described Allen as putting “the percussionist’s role into the drums” of Afrobeat, centred around the cowbell. This allowed him to be remarkably laid back even while still the lynchpin of his band’s sound.

Kuti’s band, with whom he recorded dozens of albums, played six-hour sets four nights a week, with individual songs often the length of an LP side, so a certain stamina and reserve were necessary. Kidjo said that when playing Allen never even broke into a sweat!

Kidjo and Allen had been hoping to record again together with the Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango, who died in March of coronavirus.

When he taught Femi Koleoso, one of Allen’s first questions to the young drummer was, “Why is everything so aggressive?” Instead Allen encouraged playing quietly so the younger player could understand what was inside the beat. Allen himself had learned from a West Coast jazz drummer to practice playing on pillows to add flexibility: “Effortless—that’s what I tried to catch from [drummer Frank Butler].”

Once Allen started playing, he quickly found work in Lagos’ highlife bands. In 1964, he auditioned for a jazz band organised by Fela Ransome-Kuti, as he was then known.

Kuti had just returned to newly independent Nigeria after five years studying music in London, where he played in an expatriate highlife band. The Lagos jazz band had only limited success, and Kuti began to expand its influences. This “highlife jazz” band, Koola Lobitos, meshed Kuti and Allen’s musical conceptions, blending jazz with local pop forms.

Koola Lobitos were locally successful in Nigeria and Ghana

(home of Allen's maternal family), and Ghanaian promoter Raymond Aziz coined the term Afrobeat to describe them.

In 1969, at the height of the Biafran secessionist conflict, Koola Lobitos undertook a 10-month tour of the US. There Kuti met Sandra Izsadore, who introduced him to the writings of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver and other black radicals. He became sympathetic to the Pan-Africanism of Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.

The band threw American funk into their mix, and Kuti began to write more explicitly political lyrics influenced by the Black Power movement, like "Black Man's Cry" and "Why Black Man Dey Suffer." Kuti expounded in these songs a black nationalist philosophy he called Blackism.

On their return to Lagos the band was renamed Fela Ransome-Kuti and Africa 70. He would later change his own name to Fela Anikulapo-Kuti—"he who has control over death." Kuti's politicisation made him a vocal critic of government corruption, mismanagement, abuses of the underprivileged and the military. This made him a target of the authorities and he was beaten, arrested and jailed frequently.

The rock drummer Ginger Baker (1939-2019), who had first met Kuti in London, lived in Nigeria between 1970 and 1976, funding the country's first 16-track recording studio and playing on several Africa 70 recordings including the remarkable album *Live!* (1971). He spent a lot of time at Kuti's house, which the bandleader fenced around in 1974 and declared an independent state, the Kalakuta Republic.

In 1977, after Kuti sang his satire about the army, "Zombie," around a thousand soldiers attacked Kalakuta, burning the house and beating and raping its residents. Kuti's 77-year-old mother, a veteran of the anti-colonial struggles, was thrown from a window. She died the following year from the trauma.

Allen admired Kuti's refusal to fawn: "To sing against the government? Most of the bands I knew were praising them ... Fela was against flattery, and so was I. I don't want to play the music of flattery."

He also recognised the legitimacy of Kuti's targets. "What [Fela] was challenging, he was right," he said, and he had realised that the government response was brutal: "I just said: '[Fela] is going to be an icon, and they will kill him one day.'"

However, this agreement only went so far.

Perhaps in response to the treatment meted out to Kuti, he withdrew from "singing militant," saying "It's not my thing." The step back was not to his credit, especially as he continued to acknowledge Kuti's authority. In 2016, Allen said that "If you check most of his [Fela's] lyrics ... in the 70s and 80s, that is what is happening right now."

The band performed and recorded regularly through all this. Kuti was providing the band arrangements, with Allen creating his own essential sound within that. The drummer was musically happy, but felt increasingly financially exploited.

In 1978, the band played the Berlin Jazz Festival, and a recent CD reissue of *Live!* included the astonishing 16-minute

drum duet between Allen and Baker recorded there. Baker's big hitting, which often obscured some of his real jazz qualities as a drummer, are here brilliantly focused and directed by Allen's groove. There was also a fine live performance of "Egbe Mi O" by Allen and Baker at a 2013 tribute concert to Kuti.

The financial disputes came to a head in Berlin, where the whole band quit in a dispute over unpaid royalties. Allen recorded one album with Africa 70 but could not establish his own band in Nigeria. He moved to London before settling in Paris in 1985.

The early French recordings were disappointing, with his playing disappearing under a swamp of electronica. He never sat still, however, and continued expanding his musical palette into what he called Afrofunk. By the late 1990s he was beginning to achieve a more successful sound. Paving the way was *Black Voices* (1999), an often hypnotic album that gave Allen space to swing inside dub electronics.

Allen was fêted by younger performers, like Blur's Damon Albarn, who became a frequent collaborator in projects like *The Good, The Bad and the Queen*, alongside Clash bassist Paul Simonon and former Verve guitarist Simon Tong. A new song with Albarn's Gorillaz and rapper Skepta has just been released.

Allen also recently released *Rejoice* with veteran South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela (1939-2018), whom he had met in Lagos in the 1970s. He had been planning an album this year with young musicians in Nigeria, London, Paris and America. "I want to take care of youngsters—they have messages and I want to bring them on my beat."

Asked to sum himself up in three words, Allen said "Simple gentle guy." The comment was an understatement, but it could not hide his real drive. "I still challenge myself every time with my playing. I still want to play something impossible, something that I never played before. That's what I'm after."

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