

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Tony Allen

Without Tony Allen thrashing out a rhythm on drums, Afro-beat simply wouldn't exist. Nigel Williamson looks back on the long and distinguished career of Fela's former collaborator



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According to legend, Tony Allen can drum in a different time signature with each limb simultaneously. When I once asked him if it was true, his eyes twinkled. "For sure," he replied as if it was as dumb a question as asking whether he could walk and chew gum at the same time. "A drummer has two legs and two arms and, if he's any good, they're all playing different things."

You only have to listen to Allen's extraordinary cross-rhythms on all those great Fela Kuti records to realise he's probably not exaggerating. Few percussionists can lay claim to have invented a rhythm – but that's exactly what Allen did when he and Fela created the sound of Afro-beat.

In Allen's hands, Afro-beat has always been a fluid rhythm characterised by its flexibility and inventiveness. "Most composers write a drum part with a regular beat that anybody could play," he says. "I like to extract the beat that's there and then try lots of different beats and different ways of drumming around it. That's the only way not to get bored."

It's also the reason he has been able to sustain a prolific post-Fela career of his own as a composer and bandleader, and he's the second drummer (Trilok Gurtu being the first), to merit inclusion in a *Songlines* Beginner's Guide.

Born in Lagos in 1940, he began to play *claves* (sticks) in his teens with Sir Victor Olaiya's highlife band, the Cool Cats. When the drummer left, he was promoted to the first drum stool and went on to play with a number of the other bands emerging in Lagos around the time of the country's independence, including Agu Norris and the Heatwaves, the Nigerian Messengers and the Melody Angels.

Combining influences that spanned traditional Yoruba rhythms, highlife and American jazz – particularly the work of drummers Max Roach and Art Blakey – he swiftly developed his own unique sound.

The meeting that was to change his life came in 1964 when he auditioned for Fela Kuti's jazz-highlife band, Koola Lobitos. Their partnership lasted some 16 years, during which time they forged some of the most militant, incendiary and influential music ever to come out of Africa, hitting a purple patch in the 1970s.

James Brown's visit to Lagos in 1970 is often credited with changing the way African musicians played, but the way Allen tells it, the influence was the other way around: "What really happened was that his musicians came to our club to see us every night after their show. People like Bootsy Collins were sitting there writing down my patterns. The truth is that James Brown's band learned

A youthful Tony Allen pictured in Nigeria



With Damon Albarn in The Good, The Bad & The Queen



At EMI's studios in London in 1971, with Fela Kuti pictured far left

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more from African musicians than we learned from James Brown."

Allen ended up playing on more than 30 Fela Kuti albums, not just providing the backbeat, but also acting as his bandleader and co-conspirator. "Fela used to write out the parts for all the musicians in the band but I was the only one who originated the music I played," he says proudly. "Without Tony Allen, there would be no Afro-beat," was Fela's own assessment many years later, although he wasn't quite so generous in sharing the royalties – a frustration that eventually led Allen to leave in order to pursue his own path in 1980.

Many of his solo recordings have faithfully kept the original flame of Afro-beat alive. But many of Allen's solo recordings have also shown a refreshing and open-minded interest in updating the music and he has proved himself adept at stepping out of his 'comfort zone' to play in Damon Albarn's band, The Good, The Bad & The Queen.

Drumming is a highly physical discipline and you might conclude it's a young man's

game. But as he approaches 70, Allen shows no sign of letting up, recently signing to World Circuit and releasing a new album, *Secret Agent* (a Top of the World last issue), which is as fine as anything in his long career. He also continues to tour endlessly and has his own explanation for this indefatigability. "In Africa, when I used to play with Fela, it was six hours non-stop," he says. "That's what I was used to for years – playing all night. Now the maximum you're ever on stage is two hours. Sometimes I feel that just when you start to warm up, that's when the set's over and you have to stop. It's disappointing."

To stay alive, Afro-beat has to keep evolving, he believes. "The core is the rhythm – my rhythm – and the rhythm is Afro-beat," he once told me. "That won't change. But that doesn't mean you can't make it sound fresh." ●

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BEST...

...ALBUMS



Secret Agent (World Circuit, 2009)

Allen's most recent release – and first for the World Circuit label – proves he still reigns supreme as one of Afro-beat's innovators. Recorded in Lagos with guest vocalists, it was a Top of the World in #61.



Afro Disco Beat (Vampisoul, 2007)

A splendid value two-CD reissue of Allen's first four 'solo' albums, recorded in Lagos with Fela Kuti producing: *Jealousy* (1975); *Progress* (1977); *No Accommodation For Lagos* and *No Discrimination* (both 1979). Classic Afro-beat from its tumultuous golden age.



Lagos No Shaking (Honest Jon's, 2006)

After more than two decades living and recording in Europe, Allen went back to Nigeria to record this majestic groove-laden set – fierce, raw and urgent, yet with plenty of jazzy, loose-limbed subtlety.



NEPA (Never Expect Power Always) (Wrasse, 2002)

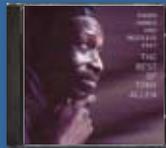
Recorded in London when Allen was on tour with King Sunny Ade and released on vinyl in 1985, this classic – the title is a cynical comment on the irregular power supply from the Nigerian Electrical Power Authority (NEPA) – is where Allen first began experimenting with dub styles and was unavailable for more than a dozen years before it was reissued on CD. The four tracks from the original *NEPA* release are augmented by 'Olokun', from 1989's *Afrobeat Express* album. Great guitar/keyboards/vocals from reggae maestro Victor Addis, too.



Black Voices (Comet Records, 1999)

Allen at his most innovative on a set of futuristic, erotic voodoo songs, marrying classic Afro-beat to dub and electronic influences with co-writing credits and vocals by Michael 'Clip' Payne and Gary 'Mudbone' Cooper of the P-Funk All-Stars.

...COMPILATIONS



Eager Hands and Restless Feet (Wrasse, 2006)

Ten tracks well balanced between his Lagos-recorded albums of the 70s and his more recent work. Other than *Lagos No Shaking*, all of the albums recommended here are well represented.

LIKE TONY ALLEN? THEN TRY... SEUN KUTI & EGYPT 80



Many Things (Tôt ou Tard, 2008)

If Fela's youngest son, born in 1982, keeps going as long as 'Uncle Tony', the spirit of Afro-beat is in safe hands until at least 2050.

