

DRUM KIT LESSON #5

TONY ALLEN AND AFROBEAT

07/05/2020

Greetings people of Core Arts. Firstly, I must apologise for the late delivery of this text. You see, last week I was writing up my lesson about the musical style called Afrobeat and the primary proponent of that style, probably my favourite drummer, Tony Oladipo Allen, may his soul rest in eternal peace. You see, last Thursday, exactly one week ago I was writing about the skill, invention and general supremacy of the drumming of Tony Allen, how he propelled the legendary Africa 70 band of Fela Kuti, when via social media I heard the news, the sad news, that Tony had passed. I was stunned and shocked. Some people said it was a hoax. A hoax? Who would do that? We scrambled to the internet to try and find out, was it true? Please let it be a hoax. Who was the source of this tragic information? Was it reliable? I checked, and knowing the source I knew it must be true. A few minutes later, it was sadly confirmed by another musician and colleague of Tony Allen, that it was true.

So, this is in honour of Tony Oladipo Allen, 1940-2020.

Tony Allen and Fela Kuti started working together in 1964. Tony was the only drummer who could play what Fela was after, a blend of Hi-Life and Jazz. This was the early days, before the visit to the USA where Fela was turned on to the Civil Rights and Black Power movement and he changed, realising that his music was not for entertainment, but for revolution. This was before Tony Allen and Fela brought more of the American influence back to Nigeria, full circle. James Brown. The funk added to the traditional Nigerian rhythms, West African Hi-Life and Jazz became AFROBEAT. Today, there are younger artists playing a style called Afrobeats which uses electronic instrumentation, but this is not the same style.

This was a time of progress but also of repression and state brutality in Nigeria, of civil rights, of political unrest and Fela Ransome Kuti, who then became Fela Anikulapo Kuti (an action of 'colonial rejection') was like a lightning rod. Fierce, articulate, outspoken, fearless, provocative. At the Shrine Club the band would play all night, 6 hours at least and Tony Allen was behind the drum kit the whole time. How many hours playing without rest?

Tony Allen passed to the ancestors last Thursday 30th April 2020. People who knew him loved him. I was lucky enough to meet him a few times and play with him a couple of times. Tony exuded quiet calm, authority and humility, empathy, kindness and acute perception, and of course heaps of experience. All through those turbulent 1960s and 1960s Tony was the anchorman, the driver and the musical director of Fela's band, perhaps the link between Fela and the musicians. I don't know exactly, I wasn't there. There are some good interviews with

Tony Allen online and a very good one on BBC Radio 6 Music – link here for a short time:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m00089np>

There is a ‘sophistication’ to Tony Allen’s playing. Incredibly relaxed, yet rhythmically precise. And he swings like a beast!

He was a good writer too. Check his albums ‘No Accommodation for Lagos’, ‘Jealousy’, NEPA all the way up to ‘Rejoice’ his collaboration with South African musician Hugh Masakela which was released just a month ago. Tony was a prolific collaborator who struck up a friendship and professional relationship a few years ago with Damon Albarn, he of Blur and ‘Gorillaz’ fame. This was also a great time for Tony’s career. The increased exposure of collaborating with a big ‘pop star’ must have brought some welcome income, but I get the feeling that Tony’s real pay was the joy of creating and collaborating, of going forward, always hungry for new experiences and developments of the music.

If you watch videos of him playing, he has a very unorthodox style.

With shekere, woodblock and Nigerian drums that I confess I do not know the names of, keeping mainly unchanging patterns, Tony Allen paints rhythmic pictures, directs the band with fills and dynamics, makes you dance even more. The Africa 70 is probably my favourite band. Today it certainly is.

Tony Allen. Time to listen more.

Drummers. Play with respect and heart and love.

RIP Tony Oladipo Allen. 1940-2020