

# WORTH THE WAIT

Two legends of African music – Hugh Masekela and Tony Allen – first met nearly half a century ago, but their music is only just seeing the light of day, two years after the trumpet player’s death.

**Nigel Williamson** finds out what took them so long

“**W**hy did it take so long for us to get together and do it? I don’t know,” Tony Allen says of his splendid but much delayed collaborative album with the late, great Hugh Masekela – a record that, one way or another, has taken almost half a century from conception to completion. “You can’t make the sun rise when it isn’t morning,” he reasons in his deep, quiet voice. “But when the time comes it will happen.”

Bear with me, because the story behind *Rejoice*, the album Allen and Masekela talked about making for decades, is a complicated and convoluted one. The good news – as you can read in Robin Denselow’s five-star review of the album last issue – is that the music is glorious and more than worth the long wait. “I just wish Hugh was still around to hear how it turned out,” Allen adds poignantly.

When Tony Allen and Hugh Masekela first met some 47 years ago, both were still in their early 30s but were already giants of African music in their different fields. After being forced into exile by South Africa’s apartheid regime in the 1960s, Masekela found pop success in the US where he had a No 1 with ‘Grazing in the Grass’ and went on to become the foremost ambassador of black South African music, his jazzy trumpet playing instantly recognisable for its burnished sound and indestructible groove.

As the drummer and director of Fela Kuti’s Africa 70, the Nigerian-born Allen co-invented and powered the mighty

sound of Afrobeat. Influenced by the rhythms of highlife and by American jazz drummers such as Max Roach and Art Blakey, he spent 15 years playing with Fela between 1964 and 1979, during which time they recorded more than 30 albums together. Even Fela – not a man given to modesty – conceded that “without Tony Allen, there would be no Afrobeat.”

When I catch up with the 79-year-old Allen, he’s in London on a day trip via Eurostar from Paris, where he has made his home for the last 35 years. “I first got to know Hugh in Nigeria in 1973,” he says. “He was passing through, hanging out at Fela’s place and we all played together.”

They renewed acquaintance four years later when Masekela was in Lagos for FESTAC 77 festival, a month-long festival of black and African arts and culture. “While he was in town Hugh tried to arrange some recordings with us but with all the problems Fela was having with the military government it never happened,” Allen recalls. Shortly after Masekela left, soldiers attacked and burned down