



HUGH MASEKELA AT 70

Photograph by Hugh Mdlalose

*"I think that's where
 [Village Vanguard Gate in New York City] I
 met Hugh Masekela,
 the very fine South African trumpet
 player. He had
 just come over the States
 and was doing real good.
 He was a
 friend of Dizzy's [Gillespie],
 who I think had helped sponsor
 him while he went to music school
 [Julliard School of Music]
 here. I remember one night riding uptown
 [direction of Harlem] with him being
 somewhat in awe that he was in the
 same car with me. He told me I had been
 a hero of his and
 other blacks in South Africa when I stood
 up to that policeman
 outside Birdland that time, and I
 remember being surprised
 they even knew about that kind of thing
 over there in
 Africa. Hugh had his own approach to
 playing the trumpet
 even then, had his own sound. I thought
 that was good,
 although I didn't think he played black
 American music too
 well."*

- Miles Davis, *The Autobiography with Quincy Troupe* (1989).

HOW DOES ONE
 BEGIN CELEBRAT-
 ING LEGENDARY
 SOUTH AFRICAN
 TRUMPETER
 HUGH MASEKE-
 LA, GIVEN THESE
 WORDS OF PRAISE
 FROM ONE OF THE GREATEST HORN
 PLAYERS IN THE HISTORY OF JAZZ, ASKS
 NTONGELA MASILELA.

Miles Davis belongs to the jazz pantheon with Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown and Freddie Hubbard among others. What distinguished Miles from this pride of jazz lions was his political awareness of the significance of Africa. He also learnt about the continent the hard way through the great drummer Max Roach. It is said that Miles was giving one of his last performances with his first great quintet (John Coltrane, Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland and Paul Chambers), at Carnegie Hall for African students in the US, when Roach and a group of African students stopped the concert for about 40 minutes protesting against one of the concert sponsors alleged to have had links with the apartheid regime. This was shortly after the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960. After explaining his protest motives to the audience, Roach left the stage and the concert resumed.

Perhaps it would have been hard for Miles Davis to ignore Max Roach in this embarrassing moment. In his youth in the late 1940s he and Roach had been in Charlie Parker's band. Also, like Davis's father who followed the teachings of Marcus Garvey, Roach was a black nationalist. Max Roach and Miles Davis belonged to the hard bebop generation of jazz musicians of the 1950s and 1960s to whom jazz and politics were inseparable. Roach's album *We Insist! – Freedom Now* (1960) and Davis's albums *Tutu* and *Amandla* released in 1986 and 1989 respectively illustrate the point.

So when Davis was driving Hugh Masekela in his car and talking, about a year after the Carnegie Hall event, they were well aware of each other's country's politics. Being a member of the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s, which had been profoundly influenced by the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, Masekela was very aware of the cultural politics and achievements that had made the New Africans in South Africa emulate the New Negroes of the United States. From Sophiatown to New York and Los Angeles, Masekela, born in modest Witbank on 4 April 1939, was showing in America in the mid-20th century via New African modernity, what the New Negro intellectuals had imparted via New African modernity in the 19th century. It was a remarkable feat for a 30-year old. He asserts as much in his autobiography: *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (2004). He recalls how in the 1950s his generation of musicians, which included Kippie Moeketsi, Dolly Rathbebe, Abdullah Ibrahim (then known as Dollar Brand), Jonas Gwangwa, Miriam Makeba and Ben Gwigwi Mrwebi, had immersed themselves in African American music such as the Negro spirituals, the blues, gospel and jazz.

More important to them was the style of jazz emanating from the bebop revolution, led by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in New York City in the late 1940s: from Sarah Vaughan to Dinah Washington, J. J. Johnson to Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis to Fats Navarro.

They also read *Drum* magazine which serialised the autobiographies of Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong. *Drum* writers such as Todd Matshikiza and Bloke Modisane, reviewed jazz albums by black Americans in *Golden City Post*. In a sense, Masekela and his peers, benefitted immensely from the cultural and artistic explosion of the Sophiatown Renaissance, the last intellectual and cultural group of the New African Movement that stretched from 1904 to 1960. Masekela's article on the 10th anniversary of the 1994 elections ("*Miracle Imperfect*", *This Day, Tuesday, April 13, 2004*) provides a searing

analysis of the refusal of some South African whites to accept the new democratic dispensation. Masekela's article is as important as the essay by Lewis Nkosi entitled "*The Ideology of Reconciliation: Its Effects on South African Culture*", published in the first edition of *Baobab* in Autumn 2008.

THE RUNAWAY FIRES OF GRAZING IN THE GRASS

Miles Davis admitted that although he was musically ahead of Masekela, his soul brother from Africa was intellectually strong and a quick learner. Masekela was to prove himself formidable in the 1960s, becoming a major star with the song *Grazing in the Grass*, the number one song internationally in late 1968 and early 1969. Given this achievement, it's appropriate that today, 40 years after its effect, he and Miriam Makeba are regarded by many American scholars of popular culture as the originators of what came to be known as "world music". They, together with other intellectuals, artists and political leaders who had fled to exile in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre, had been enriched by the New African Movement's impact in the construction of modernity in South Africa.

The struggle between European modernity and New African modernity was crucial in South African political history in the 20th century. The victory of 1994, therefore, also marked the defeat of white nationalism, an offshoot of European modernity. His role in the liberation struggle was in part, an act of self-redemption. As he says in his autobiography, on becoming a megastar in the 1960s he descended into the debauchery of drugs and the hedonism of sex in the 1970s. In the process he managed to lose \$53 million.

To get personal for a moment: at the height of his popularity as a megastar Masekela took me to a Gato Barbieri concert at the Greek Theatre in the early 1970s.

Perhaps this was because I had told him that I idolised the 'Cat' from Argentina because he played deep streams of revolutionary consciousness on the saxophone.

When Masekela entered the concert hall, bumping to his front seat with me behind about 20 minutes after the concert had begun, practically all eyes turned in his direction. When he took his seat right in front of Gato Barbieri, with me next to the famous trumpeter, the 'Cat' nodded to acknowledge him.

The gesture was one of the greatest thrills of my life. At this time the great saxophonist was pushing the idea of Third World music. He had begun to exemplify the concept of this music years earlier by recording an album in Milan, Italy, in 1968 called *Hamba Khale* (perhaps the intended title was *Hamba Kahle*) with Abdullah Ibrahim.

MASEKELA – THE APPLE OF LOS ANGELES

Masekela was dearly loved in Los Angeles, especially by African Americans, from when he arrived in the late 1960s from New York City to his departure for Conakry, Guineau in 1973. This love might have been partly due to LA being the most informed of all American cities about apartheid South Africa. Also, of all American newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times*, provided the most extensive coverage of South Africa from the late 1960s onwards. Undoubtedly in the 1980s its comprehensive coverage of the struggle against apartheid was the best in the United States. The paper's interest in Africa, especially South Africa, was directly connected to the fact that until the early 1990s, UCLA had one of the two best African Studies centres in the country; the other was at Northwestern University in Evanston (a suburb of Chicago). UCLA attracted some of the exiled New African intellectuals of the New African Movement: A.C. Jordan, the novelist and pre-eminent scholar of Xhosa literature (1961 - 1967), the distinguished Sesotho literary

scholar Daniel P. Kunene (1968 - 1970) and Mazisi Kunene (1975 - 1993) who wrote the renowned Zulu epics *Emperor Shaka the Great* and *Anthem of the Decades*. In addition to these intellectuals, writers and scholars, there were musicians, actors, artists of the Sophiatown Renaissance: Letta Mbulu, Jonas Gwangwa, Philemon Hou, Caiphus Semanya and Zakes Mokae. The extraordinary sculptor Dumile Feni spent the last 15 years of his life in this city. So, Masekela belonged to this illustrious generation of South African cultural stars all based in the 'City of Angels'. These fabulous individuals were part of the imaginary space of LA, which presumably informed the ethical imagination of the *Los Angeles Times*.

One distinction of Masekela from his illustrious compatriots in exile was that his music became part of the soundtrack of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Liberation Movement and the Black Arts Movement - phenomena that made America so fascinating in the 1960s. It was conjointly part of the creative noise of Sly and the Family Stone, The Stylistics, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Marvin Gaye, The Delphonics, Barry White, Sam Cooke, The Supremes, Jimi Hendrix and many others. While recording, in one single night in 1965, the eight tracks of a live performance released in 1966 as *The Americanization of Ouga Booga* with hits like *Bajabula Bonke* and *Dzinorabino*, Masekela could not have anticipated the overwhelming impact of this album, especially among African Americans. The album did not only prove the correctness of Miles Davis's assessment regarding the path Masekela should take, but also the young trumpeter's astuteness in listening to that invaluable advice.

Befittingly, the last track of *The Americanization of...* is dedicated to John Coltrane and Miles Davis.

The image of modern Africa created by this album resonated with the imaginary of Africa imprinted in the souls of young African Americans, the vanguard of the Black Panther Party, the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and US Organisation.

The dashikis and Afros that were the soul style of the era were in tandem with the poetics of these tracks. This was also true of his next album, *The Lasting Impressions of Hugh Masekela*, with a dedication to Kippie Moeketsi and featuring *Bo Masekela*, a classic composed by Caiphus Semanya. The blazing success of *Grazing in the Grass* marked Hugh Masekela's majestic arrival at the centre stage of American popular music. Consequently, it made sense for him to move to Malibu Beach where Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor and other megastars lived, not far from his mentor Miles Davis.

Fela Kuti, the Nigerian music genius and king of Afro-beat, arrived in Los Angeles at this time in 1969 but could not connect with Masekela. However, they met a few years later when Masekela had returned to Africa. The encounter was to prove momentous.

Hollywood films were also crucially important in the formative years of Hugh Masekela's, artistic and cultural growth. In 50s Sophiatown for instance, the American film, *The Street With No Name* (1948) starring Richard Widmark and directed by William Keighley, was quite popular especially among black South Africans. For the 14-year-old Masekela, watching Kirk Douglas in *Young Man With a Horn* (1950) a movie on the tragic life of the trumpet genius Bix Beiderbecke who died very young in the 1930s, influenced him to become a trumpeter. His father, Thomas Masekela, was a sculptor and painter, and a close friend of New African artists like Ernest Mancoba and Gerald Sekoto in 1930s Pietersburg, now known as Polokwane. It was

also at this time that the Hugh Masekela was exposed to the swing era band music of Louis Armstrong, Glenn Miller and others. Determined, he prevailed on the progressive Anglican priest Father Trevor Huddleston in Sophiatown to write to Louis Armstrong, requesting a gift in the form of a trumpet. Unbelievably, the man who invented soloing in jazz through his inventiveness in *West End Blues* in the 1920s did send the precious gift to South Africa.

As history would have it, at 20, Hugh Masekela was a member of the Jazz Epistles, perhaps the first truly serious bebop band in South Africa at the time. The band also featured Jonas Gwangwa, Johnny Gertze, Kippie Moeketsi, Abdullah Ibrahim and Early Mabuza; names that would later be associated with the best in South Africa's jazz heritage. The Jazz Epistles were also an indication that whatever revolution John Coltrane was undertaking with *Giant Steps* (1960) and Miles Davis with *Kind of Blue* (1959), these young musicians were intent on emulating and giving it a unique South African signature.

Perhaps the greatest tribute we can pay Masekela on his 70th birthday, is to acknowledge his major achievement of bringing black America and black South Africa together through his fiercely independent craft and bold cultural activism. These achievements make Hugh Masekela a true Pan Africanist in the historical and cultural sense, a legend an luminous artist of all times. ■