

Review

Allen, Tony, with Michael Veal. 2013. *Tony Allen: An Autobiography of the Master Drummer of Afrobeat*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. ISBN 978-0-8223-5577-9 (pbk). 199 pp.

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Michael E. Veal has collaborated with Tony Allen to produce an entertaining and highly informative autobiography that focuses on Allen's lifelong dedication to music and the drum set. In this book, Veal continues his investigation of Afrobeat which began with his biography of Fela Kuti (Veal 2000). This time, his focus turns to the man responsible for the pulsating groove of Afrobeat, drum set artist Tony Allen. While Fela was the creative genius that was responsible for Afrobeat, Allen's drum set rhythms became an integral element of the sound signature, so much so that his departure from Fela Kuti's Africa 70 in 1979 saw Fela employing more percussionists to help recreate Allen's one-man sound (150).

This autobiography has been compiled from interviews that Veal conducted with Allen between 2004 and 2011. While Veal's voice narrates the introduction, it is Allen's voice that carries throughout the rest of the work. Written in the first person, it is Allen's own words that, without interruption, tell us his story. We are led chronologically through his life, through his middle-class upbringing in Lagos, learning his craft in Lagos' vibrant musical scene of the 1960s, his time playing with Fela, and his move to France and his most recent musical endeavours. An engaging storyteller, Allen peppers the narrative with entertaining anecdotes and observations on a range of issues, which provide an illuminating account of musical life in post-independence Nigeria, as well as the struggles faced by African migrant musicians in Europe.

It is clear that the drum set is central to Allen's identity. This in itself makes this book an important contribution to African music studies, as drumming in an African context invariably references hand drumming, not the drum set. In the introduction Veal emphasizes the point that this is often owing to the 'primitivist/exoticist discourse around African drumming that prevails in the West' (4), and has little to do with a lack of good African drum set artists. For this reason Allen's

recollections of other important West African drummers is a welcome addition, and may go some way in creating a broader recognition of the important innovators of African drum set styles.

Allen's account of how he developed his own unique approach to drum set performance references the importance of cross-cultural learning. His own influences stemmed as much from the drumming of Elvin Jones and Art Blakey as they did from the music of his homeland. He credits this mix of influences as the source from which he began to create his own style. While he does not go into technical detail, Allen illustrates some of the key ways that he changed common African approaches to drum set performance, in the process radically redefining the role and capabilities of the drum set in all African popular music. Unfortunately for those of us who would have liked to have seen a deeper analysis of Allen's drumming style, this book only offers a broad but tantalizing outline.

But while the drum set is central to the story of Allen's life, it is his recollections of his time playing with Fela where Allen's story is at its most engaging. Owing to Allen's long involvement with Fela, particularly at the early developmental stages, we are given intimate insights into the musical development of Afrobeat, as well as the personal development of Fela Kuti. While Afrobeat has been acknowledged as a hybrid style that drew on both West African and African-American musical genres, Allen's close personal and musical friendship with Fela maps out some of the influential factors that saw Afrobeat become what it is. From Fela's experiments with highlife and jazz, the band's ten-month stay in the USA, and the politicization of Fela, Allen documents Afrobeat's emergence from the inside.

As Veal makes clear in the introduction, this is not really an academic text. It is one man's musical story told in his own words, and it forgoes the analysis that is present in other biographies that combine the voice of the subject with the voice of the researcher (for example Guilbault and Cape 2014; Vélez 2000). In some ways, this allows the reader more freedom to take away their own meaning from Allen's story. Allen's observations on the life of musicians in Nigeria, his enduring friendship with Fela, and the struggles he faced as an African living and working in Europe, come across as quite perceptive and wise. He also does not shy away from revealing his own weaknesses, adding to the sense of honesty that he transmits.

Veal has to be applauded for the way that he has presented Allen's story. While the raw material was gleaned from interviews and conversations with Allen over a seven-year period, the finished product unfolds organically and is enticingly readable, creating the feeling that Allen is talking directly to you as he narrates his story. While this obviously owes a lot to Allen's engaging story-telling style, undoubtedly it is also owing to Veal's deep understanding of the subject matter and his organization of the source material. Unfortunately for us, Veal does not

elaborate on the methods and concepts that guided his choice of content or his organizing principles. For instance, does all of the text follow the same form as the interviews, or were some sections pasted together from different interviews? What were some of the questions that Veal asked, and why did he choose to do so? I think that including some of these methodological considerations may have enhanced the book's value for anyone interested in pursuing ethnographic autobiography. While this does not detract from the book, its addition would have been welcome.

This book will appeal to many people for many reasons, and for sheer reading pleasure alone I would recommend it. For ethnomusicologists and anthropologists it is rich with first-hand ethnographic detail that could be used to enhance and support research into popular African music studies, cross-cultural music studies, migrant music studies, and African studies in general. For drummers, it contributes to an understanding of how Allen developed his unique style. And for fans of Afrobeat and Fela Kuti, it offers a must-have, personal account of one of the most influential names in world music to have graced the stage.

References

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