

Brett Rubin



Hugh Masekela

Diane Coetzer traces the impressive career of the hugely influential South African horn player

When Hugh Masekela's recording of 'Grazing in the Grass' streaked to number one on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 1968, it brought the trumpeter international fame on a scale unprecedented for a South African. The cut, which appeared on the album *The Promise of a Future*, had been issued by Chisa (Zulu slang for 'Hot'), a label Masekela had started with producer Stewart Levine in the mid-60s. Opening with the sound of Masekela playing on a cowbell with two drumsticks, 'Grazing in the Grass' featured Bruce Langhorne's easy-going guitar work but it was Masekela's buoyant horn, joyfully carrying with it a distinctive African styling, that cast a spell over American listeners.

Still, Masekela's stunning success with the Philemon Hou-composed instrumental was

bittersweet for the 29-year-old exile. Spooked by a close call with the apartheid regime's special branch police and shocked at the massacre of peaceful demonstrators in Sharpeville in March, Masekela had finally been able to get a passport in May 1960 and boarded a plane for London, and, a few months later, the US. Encouraged and championed by Miriam Makeba, who was living in New York, Masekela left behind a loving family who had watched their son and brother's early interest in music develop into a full-blown obsession to be a trumpet player.

In 1953, while a teenager at Johannesburg's St Peter's boarding school, he'd seen Kirk Douglas in *Young Man with a Horn* and had wasted no time in persuading Father Trevor Huddleston, his school superintendent and a

leading anti-apartheid activist, to help him get his first trumpet. Over the next seven years Masekela honed his playing skills with the school band and the Huddleston Jazz Band, and was soon gigging with the Merry Makers' Orchestra where he learned how to hold long notes and play confidently between *mbaqanga* grooves. He took up with the African Jazz and Variety Revue, which was taking township jazz across the country, and played trumpet in *King Kong*, the first 'all-African jazz opera' featuring Makeba in the female lead. In the months before Masekela's flight into exile, he had also formed The Jazz Epistles with Abdullah Ibrahim (then known as Dollar Brand), Kippie Moeketsi, Jonas Gwangwa and Johnny Gertze – in the process creating what is still the most thrilling line-up of jazz musicians in South Africa's history. The band's sole record, *Jazz Epistle Verse 1*, remains a dazzlingly original showcase of modern jazz.

On the day of Masekela's arrival in New York he went to the Jazz Gallery on East Eighth Street to see Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. With the ever-generous Makeba as the link, Masekela had been corresponding with Gillespie while still in South Africa, and the American trumpeter later took him to another

club to meet Charles Mingus and Max Roach. On the way back uptown at the end of the night, he stopped at the Half Note where John Coltrane was performing with a new group.

This intoxicating introduction to the American jazz scene set the tone for Masekela's years in exile, that saw him blot out the aching for his family and country by unabashedly embracing the musical possibilities offered by his new home. He met Levine during his second year at the Manhattan School of Music and soon began getting session and club work. With Harry Belafonte's encouragement, he began recording *Trumpet Africaine: The New Beat from South Africa* – the first of what is now a catalogue of 44 solo recordings. Masekela hated his debut, dubbing the record a "disaster." He quickly realised that future recordings should be based on repertoire drawn from the music he'd been raised on and that he'd played back home. He also reignited his songwriting, composing the *mbaqanga* bebop track 'U, Dwi' for his second album, *Grrr*, which additionally saw Masekela branching out into singing on tracks like 'Umaningi Bona'.

From his teenage days as an emerging musician in South Africa, Masekela had never shied away from collaboration and he ramped this up in the US. It's Masekela's trumpet solo you can hear on The Byrds' hit single 'So You Want to be a Rock'n'Roll Star' – the last in their original line-up. He worked with Louis Armstrong, Belafonte, Gillespie, Fela Kuti, Marvin Gaye and Herb Alpert (on the 1978 album *Herb Alpert & Hugh Masekela*), among others. Together with Levine, Masekela organised Zaire 74 – a music festival companion to George Foreman and Muhammad Ali's 'Rumble in the Jungle.' The trumpeter later joined Paul Simon when he toured *Graceland* in 1987, playing his political anthem 'Mandela (Bring Him Back Home)' to audiences across the world.

Musically, Masekela matched his jazz rigour with a magpie's eye for musical forms that were an easy fit for his playing style and taste. The 1971 album *Hugh Masekela & The Union of South Africa* was flavoured with Nigerian highlife and soul, and his work with Ghanaian band Hedzoleh Soundz on the 1973 album, *Masekela Introducing Hedzoleh Soundz*, spliced Afrobeat with Masekela's free-floating trumpet. This wide-ranging curiosity and appetite for different music was formed in Masekela's youth. "I've had a very rich life, because Johannesburg was a melting pot of

especially migrant labourers from all over southern and central Africa," Masekela told me a few years ago. "So I was luckier than most human beings to grow up in an environment where, on weekends, you would have a choice of seeing Mozambican or Tsonga people while in another part of town, on an open veld, you could see Zulus, Sothos, Twanas, Namibians, Malawians, Zimbabweans and Botswana folk."

By his own admission Masekela was not equipped to handle the success that 'Grazing in the Grass' brought. 'I became obsessed with the pleasures of the flesh, which only led to sleepless nights, mind-boggling immorality, dishonesty, broken hearts, and hung-over mornings,' he writes in *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela*, the hugely readable autobiography he co-authored with D Michael Cheers. His return to South Africa in September 1990, after 30 years in exile, did little to end Masekela's addictions and in 1997 he entered rehab in the UK.

These days Masekela is the recipient of multiple awards, including South Africa's highest order, The Order of Ikhamanga, as well

as a number of honorary degrees and doctorates. Although now in his late 70s, he's still recording – his most recent record, *No Borders*, earned him a South African Music Award for Best Adult Contemporary Album.

His 60-year-plus live performing career has, however, been put on hold with news that Masekela – who has been in treatment for prostate cancer since 2008 – recently had an emergency operation to remove a tumour. 'I have cancelled my commitments for the immediate future as I will need all my energy to continue this fight against prostate cancer,' he said in a statement issued on October 6. This includes his upcoming UK date at the EFG London Jazz Festival where he was due to perform with Abdullah Ibrahim.

Even as he battles "this stealthy disease," Masekela's driving passion remains "making heritage visible," as witnessed by the annual Hugh Masekela Heritage Festival, which takes place in Soweto in early November. For the first time in its four-year run, the festival's namesake didn't collaborate with the line-up of talent, which this year included BCUC, Johnny Cradle and Oliver Mtukudzi. But his commitment to the event, and other heritage-based initiatives, continues. He says, "I advise every kid to check out their past because without a past you are in limbo." ♦

"I've had a very rich life because Jo'burg was a melting pot"

BEST ALBUMS



Grrr
(MGM, 1966)
After the disappointment he felt in *Trumpet Africaine*, Masekela settled into his own musical style for his second album, confidently giving *mbaqanga* an emotional complexity on tracks like 'Sharpeville'.



The Promise of a Future
(Chisa, 1968)
The No 1 hit 'Grazing in the Grass' featured in this gorgeous set, which also included 'Vuca (Wake Up)', a self-penned, rootsy track that convincingly combined Masekela's vocal and trumpet-playing.



I Am Not Afraid
(Chisa/Blue Thumb, 1974)
Recorded in LA with Hedzoleh Soundz, the seven-track record opens with a heady version of the Dizzy Gillespie's 'Night in Tunisia' but the album's emotional heart is 'Stimela', Masekela's epic lament for southern Africa's migrant labour force.



Hugh Masekela Presents the CHISA Years: 1965-1975 (Rare & Unreleased)
(BBE Records, 2006)

Fourteen lost tracks of sheer musical joy are gathered together on this release featuring Masekela playing with Letta Mbulu, Johannesburg Street Band, Ojah and others. A Top of the World review in #36.



No Borders
(Sempa, 2016)
Poignant and powerful, Masekela summons his very best on his latest record: a raging vocal track against slavery ('Shuffle & Bow'), superb horn playing ('Shango'), and a set of terrific collaborations – 'Tapera' with Oliver Mtukudzi especially shines. A Top of the World this issue, see p44.

IF YOU LIKE HUGH MASEKELA, THEN TRY ...

Sakhile



Togetherness
(Sheer Sound, 2004)
After a 14-year break from recording, Sipho Gumede, Mabi Thobejane and Khaya Mahlangu returned (with the addition of Shaluza Max Mntambo) to deliver an unforgettable reminder of just how effortlessly jazz and traditional African music mix.