

Exile's Return

Hugh Masekela's autobiography describes his struggles with apartheid and alcohol.

STILL GRAZING

The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela.
By Hugh Masekela and D. Michael Cheers.
Illustrated. 394 pp.
Crown Publishers. \$25.95.

By Eric Weisbard

IN the mid-1950's, as Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley and all the rest were leading a rock 'n' roll revolution across America, Hugh Masekela found himself staring down the barrel of a different sort of cultural onslaught. A high school student in South Africa, Masekela had just learned of the Bantu Education Act, apartheid legislation mandating that black Africans like himself receive an education inferior to whites. Trevor Huddleston, who ran St. Peter's, the prestigious missionary boarding academy that Masekela attended, announced that the school would close rather than accept the new restrictions.

With characteristic cockiness, Masekela shrugged off the news. Though he was only 16 years old, his school's musical group, the Huddleston Jazz Band, had given him enough of a reputation as a trumpeter to ensure a professional career. The group played "township jazz," a hybrid of a hybrid: American swing layered under a particularly South African fusion of folk song and missionary musical influences. Miriam Makeba, seven years older than Masekela and already the great love of his young life, also came out of this scene, which played an immense role in the anti-apartheid struggle (as shown in the great documentary "Amandla!") and fostered the *mbaqanga* sound that Paul Simon drew on for his album "Graceland."

This is musical history of global import, fascinating not least for its alien-reality relationship to the American stories of rock, rhythm-and-blues, jazz and folk. Masekela's life would intersect all these genres at odd angles. Early, he received a trumpet sent to him, at Huddleston's urging, by Louis Armstrong. He came to the United States in 1960 with the assured support of Makeba and Harry Belafonte, both of whom were commercial "world music" artists before the term existed. On Masekela's first night in New York, he met and heard Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Max Roach and John Coltrane. He enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music, a classical conservatory that was a training ground for Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Richard Davis and many other jazzmen.

Masekela was a poor student but a great mingles; he quickly proved adept at combining his jazz acumen with township flavorings and whatever the politics and sounds of the times seemed to call for. His only big hit was the easy-listening lobe "Grazing in the Grass," No. 1 on the charts in 1968. By then Masekela had recorded an album, "The Americanization of Ooga-Booga," with Tom Wilson, who had been

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Hugh Masekela at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, May 2004.

Bob Dylan's producer, and had buddied with Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone. His trumpet was featured on the Byrds song "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star." He was one of only three black artists to perform at the Monterey Pop Festival, along with Hendrix and Otis Redding. In the mid-1980's, he helped produce the *mbaqanga* musical "Sarafina!," a theatrical smash that told the story of South African schoolchildren in the 1976 Soweto uprisings.

And always, by his own admission, he was consuming vast quantities of alcohol and drugs, sleeping with beautiful women the world over, throwing it all away but never quite using up those around him. Here the story becomes every entertainer's story. Let one incident stand in for many. In 1974, while working to produce a concert in tandem with the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman slugfest in Zaire, Masekela found himself bringing Mick Jagger to meet Don King in King's hotel room. King and the R & B singer Lloyd Price were both naked, with four women around them. Masekela describes their encounter in the typically studious tone he adopts throughout "Still Grazing," his autobiography written with D. Michael Cheers, who teaches journalism at the University of Mississippi: "Jagger came down hard on Don King, telling him how disgusted he was to find someone of his stature receiving guests he didn't even know in a state of undress, surrounded by sleaze, and that King should be ashamed of himself. King hit back, recalling some of the scandals he had read about in the press about Jagger. ... Carol Cole pulled me out of there and we ended up in my suite."

That's Nat Cole's daughter Carol, by the way, not as big a force in Masekela's life as Cab Calloway's daughter Chris, a former wife. Where were we again? By book's end, everything musical past and present is blurring. At one point, Masekela revisits his mentor Trevor Huddleston, now back in

England. There, we're told, he was made bishop of Stepney, "in the rough East End of London, where he started the Human League, another music group that became world famous. He was very proud of them." One more time? An Anglican missionary, Trevor Huddleston, started the new wave synth-pop band Human League, of "Don't You Want Me?"

"Still Grazing" keeps some interest because for all the pop-rock-glop, it remains such an African account. For much of the 1970's and into the 80's, the bulk of his commercial success behind him, Masekela lived in Africa, relying on the sufferance of dictators in Guinea and Zaire, staying just safe of the South African regime in Botswana. His account of his work with Fela Anikulapo Kuti in Nigeria, where the inventor of Afrobeat lived in a compound surrounded by women who would do his every bidding, coexists with an equally salivating but precise appreciation of Kuti's epic-length polyrhythmic beats. There is a titanic story beneath all this, where the aspirations of postindependence African nationalism are sidetracked by personal hubris and competing notions of art and culture. Masekela cannot fully tell it. But he lived it, almost as a *flâneur*, and it keeps the story of a wastrel somehow emblematic.

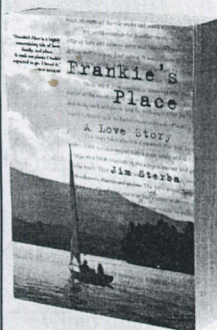
In 1955, Masekela's parents, both professionals, were less sanguine to hear that St. Peter's was closing: "The Batlowka people ... prided themselves on education and community service. Music, to them, was something that respectable people listened to, but that was only played by irresponsible, illiterate, drunken layabouts." Readers familiar with jazz history will recognize this perennial theme. Might Masekela have done better to put down his trumpet? When apartheid ended, his sister Barbara became Nelson Mandela's chief of staff, then South Africa's ambassador to France; Masekela checked into rehab. □

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