



# Rebel beat out of Africa

Nigeria's wizard of the drums is making his first tour of Australia. **Ray Purvis** reports.

**A**frobeat, I don't play any other music than Afrobeat," the strongly accented 68-year-old Nigerian-born drummer Tony Allen says, talking about arguably the most rebellious music ever to come out of Africa.

The small and wiry percussionist, who is hailed as one of the most important and influential African popular musicians of the post-colonial era, almost single-handedly created this exciting mix of African highlife music, jazz and James Brown-inspired funk that was born in Lagos in the late 1960s and spread across the world during the next decade.

Allen is credited with developing Afrobeat in collaboration with the legendary firebrand multi-instrumentalist and fellow-countryman Fela Kuti, with whom he played for 15 years. Most of this time was spent as a member of Kuti's insurrectionary 30-strong band, Africa 70. During his decade with the band he recorded three classic solo Afrobeat albums — *Jealousy* (1975), *Progress* (1977) and *No Accommodation for Lagos* (1979).

Recently this loose-limbed, straight-to-your-feet music has been enjoying a new cultural renaissance in Europe and North America. "It's getting popular now but it's still not as popular as funk or reggae . . . or whatever," he growls down the telephone line from his home in Paris. Allen has just had a run-in with a couple of less-than-informed journalists and he's not very happy. "It's still developing. The project is still open. Improvisation is essential."

The drum-kit wizard and his current six-piece band are bringing their distinctive groove-driven music to Beck's Music Box next month as part of their first Australian tour. Immediately after the Perth concert they travel to Adelaide to feature as part of the impressive roster of artists playing at this year's WOMADelaide world music festival.

Allen insists that the only reason he hasn't toured Australia until now is because he's never been invited. "I'm a musician and I travel everywhere to play," he snaps. "Nobody in Australia has invited me before now."

Recently Allen made a crossover from Afrobeat to pop music, recording and performing alongside French artists such as Air, Charlotte Gainsbourg and Sebastian Tellier and also as a member of the cross-cultural London supergroup the Good, the Bad and the Queen — a band that features Blur's Damon Albarn and the Clash's Paul Simonon.

"I'm not just a drummer, I'm a musician," he responds when asked about this recent excursion. "I will live with any music that comes my way."

It's been a long road since Allen started as a self-taught drummer at the age of 18 while working as a technician for a Nigerian radio station. His earliest musical influences were traditional Yoruba ceremonial music, the growing West African highlife music and American jazz musicians Max Roach, Elvin Jones and Art Blakey. His first professional gig was playing percussion for the Nigerian highlife band the Cool Cats.



**West Australian**  
**13/02/2009**  
**Page: 13**  
**Section: Today**  
**Region: Perth Circulation: 194862**  
**Type: Capital City Daily**  
**Size: 209.00 sq.cms**  
**Frequency: MTWTFS-**



The turning point in his life came in 1964 when he was introduced to Fela Anikulapo Kuti, who had recently returned from studying music in London and was reforming the post-bop jazz band Koola Lobitos.

It was during Koola Lobitos' visit to the US in 1969 that Allen and Kuti were first introduced to the incendiary funk of James Brown and the black militancy of the Black Panther Party. The funk added the essential rhythmic ingredient to Afrobeat and the band changed their name to Africa 70.

The influence of the Black Panthers led the fearless Kuti to embark on a life of political agitation against the military government in Nigeria that he blamed for the country's widespread poverty and persecution. Despite a decade of political harassment — Allen was imprisoned in 1974 for three days during a government-sponsored raid on a black township — Africa 70 emerged as a powerful musical force releasing over 30 albums that reinvented funk and R&B in an African context.

Allen emigrated to Paris in 1984, but has continued to champion Afrobeat and the hybrid sound of Afrofunk, releasing albums, including 1989's Afrobeat Express and his latest, Lagos No Shaking.

**Tony Allen performs at Beck's Music Box on March 5.**  
**Tickets from BOCS outlets and [perthfestival.com.au](http://perthfestival.com.au)**



Prince of percussion: Tony Allen rejoices in the music of rebellion.