

In Memoriam: Hugh Masekela



Hugh Masekela (1939-2018) was a world-renowned flugelhornist, trumpeter, bandleader, composer, singer and defiant political voice. He was born Ramopolo Hugh Masekela, April 4, 1939, in Witbank, South Africa, a coal-mining town near Johannesburg. His father, Thomas Selema Masekela, was a health inspector and noted sculptor; his mother, Pauline Bowers Masekela, was a social worker. At the age of 14, the deeply respected advocator of equal rights in South Africa, Father Trevor Huddleston, provided Masekela with a trumpet and, soon after, the Huddleston Jazz Band was formed. Masekela began to hone his, now signature, Afro-Jazz sound in the late 1950s during a period of intense creative collaboration, most notably performing in the 1959 musical *King Kong*, written by Todd Matshikiza, and, soon thereafter, as a member of the now legendary South African group, the Jazz Epistles (featuring the classic line up of Kippie Moeketsi, Abdullah Ibrahim and Jonas Gwangwa).

In 1960, at the age of 21 he left South Africa to begin what would be 30 years in exile from the land of his birth. On arrival in New York he enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music. This coincided with a golden era of jazz music and the young Masekela immersed himself in the New York jazz scene where nightly he watched greats like Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Mingus and Max Roach. Under the tutelage of Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong, Hugh was encouraged to develop his own unique style, feeding off African rather than American influences – his debut album, released in 1963, was entitled *Trumpet Africaine*.



In the late 1960s Hugh moved to Los Angeles in the heat of the ‘Summer of Love’, where he was befriended by hippie icons like David Crosby, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. In 1967 Hugh performed at the Monterey Pop Festival alongside Janis Joplin, Otis Redding, Ravi Shankar, The Who and Jimi Hendrix. In 1968, his instrumental single ‘*Grazin’ in the Grass*’ went to number one on the American pop charts and was a worldwide smash, elevating Hugh onto the international stage.

His subsequent solo career spanned six decades, during which time he has released over forty albums (and been featured on countless more) and has worked with such diverse artists as Harry Belafonte, Dizzy Gillespie, The Byrds, Fela Kuti, Marvin Gaye, Herb Alpert, Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder and the late Miriam Makeba.

In 1990 Hugh returned home, following the unbanning of the African National Congress and the release of Nelson Mandela – an event anticipated in Hugh’s anti-apartheid anthem ‘*Bring Home Nelson Mandela*’ (1986) which had been a rallying cry around the world.

In 2004 Masekela published his autobiography, *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (co-authored with D. Michael Cheers). And in June 2010 he opened the FIFA Soccer World Cup Kick-Off Concert to a global audience and performed at the event’s Opening Ceremony in Soweto’s Soccer City. Later that year he created the musical, *Songs of Migration* with director, James Ngcobo, which drew critical acclaim and played to packed houses. Also in 2010, South Africa President Jacob Zuma honored him with the highest order in South Africa: The Order of Ikhamanga, and 2011 saw Masekela receive a Lifetime Achievement award at the WOMEX World Music Expo in Copenhagen. The US Virgin Islands proclaimed ‘Hugh Masekela Day’ in March 2011, not long after Hugh joined U2 on stage during the Johannesburg leg of their 360 World Tour.



2012 was a busy year with Hugh just returning to South Africa from touring Europe with Paul Simon on the Graceland 25th Anniversary Tour. He has opened his own studio and record label, House of Masekela which has put out its first release: *Friends*, a four CD collection of jazz standards featuring his dear friend, pianist Larry Willis.

In 2014, he received an Honorary Doctorate in Music from University of York, in 2015, he received an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University, and in July 2017, Wits University conferred an honorary Doctor of Music degree to him, at the ceremony, he said “We need to study, learn, and teach our traditional music, dance, oral literature and more in our own academies and future educational institutions where we can revive and redevelop what has been lost from the positive content of our glorious history without abandoning the best of what the West has brought to our otherwise void-encrusted lives”. And in August 2017, he received the National Civil Rights Museum’s Freedom Award. Masekela died in Johannesburg on the early morning of 23 January 2018 from prostate cancer at the age of 78.



Ramopolo Hugh Masekela