

Tony Allen: The Source

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When the drums snap into place on “Moody Boy,” the opening track of Tony Allen’s *The Source*, there’s an unmistakable sense of arrival—that a colossus has entered the playing field. That was crucial, too, to the music of Fela Kuti, the Nigerian gadfly Allen drummed with for years; when the big man started singing, the other instruments quieted down as if in fright. Here, the rest of the band is rightfully in awe of the drums.

Tony Allen is a perennial dark-horse Best Drummer of All Time. His Nigerian origin situates him outside the Western drum canon, but his ability to match Ginger Baker on Fela’s *Live!* proves he can drum laps around many of the most respected rock drummers. Perhaps being part of a pantheon would be a burden for Allen, whose career is defined by curiosity. His repertoire includes a long list of Afrobeat records – as expected – but also works with admirers like Moritz von Oswald and Damon Albarn.

He isn’t showy, nor is he utilitarian. His drums are gigantic and grounded, a thick floor for the other instruments to rest on, but also brimming with detail. He can provide a sturdy, solid foundation for Fela jams that can sprawl well past half an hour, but the jazz idiom he works in here requires him to be a little fleeter behind the kit than usual.

A jazz band swirls amorphously around him, comprised mostly of Parisian and Francophone African players hired for the occasion. If there’s an overarching flaw to this album, it’s a lack of unit cohesion; keyboard presets change on a dime, and you’d be hard-pressed to identify how many instrumentalists are in his band and who’s playing what. Allen is such a rock-solid center that he deserves an equally solid band around him, and too often the sounds surrounding the drums blur together—literally on “Life is Beautiful,” which ends with the producer turning up the reverb until the song’s a ghost.

One intriguing wrinkle in the arrangement stands out: a double bass, played by Matthias Allamane. This isn’t an instrument heard much in Afrobeat, and it grounds the music in our associations of smoky jazz sessions, allowing tracks that otherwise don’t function much like jazz to sound more like the old Art Blakey records that inspired Allen. If Allen knows what sounds *feel* like jazz, the same applies to the other genre, and the organ on “Wolf Eats Wolf” immediately and deliberately ushers in a blast of Fela nostalgia.

As you’ve probably guessed, this is far from a dreary genre experiment. Allen’s having fun, and so can we. This is a great listen and even those with no knowledge of jazz or Nigerian music can enjoy this thing. Groove-centric, African-inflected music is one of the most universally enjoyable musical idioms. Allen might be beloved worldwide if he had the right promotional push, but then he might not be able to indulge in a project like this.

- Label:
Blue Note
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