

Hugh Masekela

The Horn of Freedom

Karen J. Borek

University of Pennsylvania

South African jazz musician, composer, and singer Hugh Masekela has combined African rhythmic patterns and *mbhaqanga* strains with Western swing and jazz to create his “hybrid style” of popular music. *Mbhaqanga*, as Masekela claims in his autobiography, “was the dominant music of the townships in South Africa,” and consisted of traditional chanting and drumming with jazz (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 3). Masekela was born in Witbank, South Africa, a coal-mining town near Johannesburg, on April 4, 1939. Although he grew up in a culture surrounded by rallies and protests against the apartheid government, Masekela commented that he did not intend to use music for political activism. Masekela’s music, however, does reflect the turbulent times, and it stirred anti-apartheid sentiments and concern for human rights. During an interview with television host Charlie Rose, Masekela noted that “Music was the major catalyst for our freedom” (Masekela 2009). Named after his 1968 popular instrumental song “Grazing in the Grass,” Masekela’s 2004 autobiography *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela*, co-authored by photo-journalist and professor D. Michael Cheers, traces his life experiences and musical career. Several of Masekela’s songs, including “Grazing in the Grass,” “Stimela,” “Been Such a Long Time Gone,” “Bring Him Back Home,” and “Ikhaya Lami” illustrate his musical versatility and African heritage. Africa’s beauty, freedom, oppression of people under apartheid rule, and celebration are some themes in his songs. Masekela’s songs express the traditions and social issues of his

country's ethnic cultures: Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Khoi-san, Shangaan, Ndebele, and others, as well as the urban sounds of the townships. As his talent evolved, Hugh Masekela's music played a crucial role in the nation's transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy.

Masekela's fascination with musical sounds, especially jazz rhythms, began in his early childhood. He started singing to the records on his uncle's gramophone at the age of three without knowing what the words meant (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 9). At his grandmother's shebeen, or illegal drinking place, Masekela witnessed drunken miners and other people who sang their troubles away. During his grade school years, Masekela's parents gave him piano lessons. At the age of fourteen, Masekela watched the 1949 movie *Young Man with a Horn* about American jazz trumpeter Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke, played by Kirk Douglas, which inspired him to play the trumpet. Masekela envisioned the trumpet as a symbol of freedom.

While Masekela attended St. Peter's Secondary School, a boarding school in Sophiatown, the Anglican anti-apartheid chaplain Father Trevor Huddleston had a major impact on Masekela's musical talent. Huddleston arranged for Masekela to receive a used trumpet from a local shop and to take trumpet lessons from Uncle Sauda of the Johannesburg Native Municipal Brass Band. When other schoolmates acquired musical instruments, Father Huddleston started the Huddleston Jazz Band, the first youth band in South Africa. Eventually, Huddleston was deported to England as a result of his protest of the 1953 Bantu Education Act and the school's closing. The Bantu Education Act provided government control over schools, including missionary schools like St. Peter's, formerly run by a church. This act also created segregated education, which gave black students a substandard curriculum.

Before returning to England, Father Huddleston went to the United States to visit a friend. In Rochester, New York, Huddleston went to a concert, met Louis Armstrong backstage, and mentioned the South African youth band. Louis Armstrong hoped to inspire a young musician from this distant place by donating one of his horns, which was mailed to South Africa by his wife Lucille. When Hugh Masekela received Armstrong's trumpet at the age of seventeen, he was thrilled. Masekela later wrote that receiving Armstrong's trumpet made him feel "something like a spiritual connection with Satchmo and those

musicians back in the states”: a connection to a “tradition that had crisscrossed the Atlantic from Africa to America and back” (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 82). The cover of his 2004 autobiography shows the young Hugh Masekela jumping for joy with his new trumpet in Sophiatown before the forced relocation of its black residents during apartheid. Although he had toured other African countries, “Satchmo” was denied entry into South Africa in 1960 “because Armstrong refused to play to segregated audiences” (Musinguzi 2012). Masekela finally met and thanked Louis Armstrong for the trumpet when Masekela accompanied singer Miriam Makeba at the 1964 Grammy Awards at the Hotel Astor in New York City. Armstrong won the award that year for Best Male Vocal Performance for the play *Hello Dolly*. Currently, the trumpet remains on display at the Cape Town Heritage Museum (Poole 2004).

As a teenager, Masekela performed with various groups, including the Huddleston Jazz Band, the Merry Makers, and Alfred Herbert’s African Jazz and Variety Show. Masekela also performed with the Manhattan Brothers, and he played the trumpet in the orchestra for Todd Matshikiza’s musical *King Kong* (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 97). A few years after receiving Armstrong’s trumpet, Hugh Masekela, in 1959, co-founded the Jazz Epistles band with pianist Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim). In January 1960, a turning point for Masekela took place when he was accepted “through the intercession of musicians Yehudi Menuhin and Johnny Dankworth,” associates of his former mentor Father Huddleston, to London’s Guildhall School of Music (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 104). While planning a nationwide tour with the Jazz Epistles and awaiting a passport to attend school in London, Masekela experienced another turning point on both a personal and a national level. On March 21, 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre occurred in South Africa. The apartheid police force fired at and killed sixty-nine people and injured many more who were peacefully demonstrating against pass laws that required every non-white African to carry a pass book. A state of emergency was declared by the government, which forbid meetings of more than ten people (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 106). Consequently, Masekela’s tour with the Jazz Epistles was canceled, and so he left the country in May of 1960 to study music in London. Later, African singer Miriam Makeba came to London. Makeba together with jazz musicians Dizzy Gillespie and John Mehegan helped Masekela obtain an American scholarship and acceptance “into the

Manhattan School of Music in New York” where he studied from 1960 to 1964 (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 119).

Although Masekela had previously recorded an album with the Jazz Epistles band, he completed his first solo album, *Trumpet Africaine*, in 1962; this first recording from Masekela echoed American jazz styles. The album was unpopular, so Masekela and his mentor, Harry Belafonte, became convinced that Masekela should combine some African township rhythms with American jazz styles in future records. Later, Masekela went on a pilgrimage to different African countries where he met the Ghanaian band Hedzoleh Soundz, Afrobeat musician Fela Kuti, and others who influenced his style.

An early jazz pop instrumental song “Grazing in the Grass,” with its combination of jazz and African rhythms, made Hugh Masekela famous. Composed by Philemon Hou in 1968, it became a number one hit, “a first for an African musician” according to D. Michael Cheers (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 213). This instrumental version of “Grazing in the Grass” placed South Africa on the world music map. The song sold more than four million copies in the United States and around the world. Recognition from the song allowed Masekela to become an influential voice in his country’s freedom struggle. “Grazing in the Grass” was included in Masekela’s album *Promise of a Future* (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 194). The song has an upbeat melody with Masekela beating on a cowbell and playing his trumpet. Also, the song suggests the instinctual freedom of cattle grazing on the veld. Some people thought that the song might refer to being high from smoking marijuana, also known by its nickname grass, but this has not been proven. In 1969, Harry Elston of The Friends of Distinction group wrote lyrics to the song including the words: “Grazin’ in the grass is a gas, baby, can you dig it?” Their recording with lyrics and a faster tempo also became a popular hit song.

A year before recording “Grazing in the Grass,” Masekela played his trumpet with the Byrds at the Monterey International Pop Festival in Monterey, California in 1967. They performed their pop hit “So You Want to be a Rock’ n’ Roll Star” (Kubernik and Kubernik 2011, 122). In addition, Masekela played a part in the documentary film *Monterey Pop* about the festival.

When returning to live in Woodstock, New York, Hugh Masekela experienced a creative streak one day upon recalling his birthplace of Witbank. Lyrics spontaneously came into his head, and Masekela composed the song “Stimela (The Coal Train).”

Masekela recalled the sounds made by coal-operated steam trains, and, perhaps, he also thought about the American jazz saxophonist John Coltrane (nicknamed Trane), who performed in New York at the time. As he wrote in his autobiography, Masekela recorded “Stimela” later in 1974 in the United States in collaboration with the Hedzoleh Soundz band for the album *I Am Not Afraid*. Masekela stated that this album “was instrumental in shifting our style more toward a heavy mix of jazz, highlife, mbhaqanga, Congolese rumba, and rhythm and blues” (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 288). The album contained a mixture of both African and American musical traditions.

With his flugelhorn, cow bell, and voice, Masekela creates the sounds of a train and a miner’s drill in “Stimela.” Echoing the sounds of a coal train’s movement, Masekela sings the words “a chugging, and a puffing, and a smoking.” He also sings out high notes of “toot, toot!” for the train’s whistle. Celia Wren, a reporter for *The Washington Times*, notes that Masekela with a pumping noise makes the sound of a “drill chopping away at rock,” and he “lets the word ‘deep’ sing out for several seconds” to suggest “the miners’ daily descent underground” (Wren 2012).

The train image in the song has both positive and negative associations. It transports migrant miners to work. The lyrics about the miners’ work, however, suggest exploitative labor practices: “sixteen hours or more a day/For almost no pay.” In addition to connection between two places, the train simultaneously symbolizes separation, since it is also a vehicle that separates miners from their families while they live in crowded hostels away from home.

In the later *Amandla* documentary film of 2003, Masekela has commented that the “train was South Africa’s first tragedy.” His words express the pain of exploited mineworkers, and the separation and loss of family members who sometimes never return home from work as a result of death or finding another loved one. The train, in real life, also has a connection with Masekela’s mother’s death. While in Liberia after visiting Ghana, Masekela received a telegram from his father about his mother’s death. His mother Pauline was driving her normal route to work on the day she was killed. Masekela stated: “While crossing a railroad track, her car stalled and a train hit it” (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 312). During this traumatic time, Masekela was unable to return from exile to bury his mother. This hardship caused him to become a more devoted activist against apartheid.

Besides “Stimela,” Masekela recorded with Hedzoleh Soundz the song titled “Been Such a Long Time Gone” for the *I Am Not Afraid* album of 1974. The lyrics “Been such a long time gone/I often try to remember how it was” suggest the pain of exile, feelings of displacement, the diasporic consciousness of wanting to return to one’s roots (Africa), and the singer’s desire to prevent memories of the homeland from fading. Besides English, Masekela speaks eight languages. He experienced homesickness during his time in New York. In his autobiography, Masekela wrote that he often went to Central Park and talked to himself in different languages from his homeland. One day when Masekela talked “township slang” with “hands waving, torso angling to get the point just right,” a group of people in the park thought he was crazy and asked a policeman to intervene. When stopped by the policeman, Masekela replied that he was from South Africa and was “pretending to be conversing” with “buddies back home” (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 147). This was Masekela’s way to cope with displacement.

While in exile from 1960 to 1990, Masekela frequently wished to return home. Because of his outspoken nature and activism, Masekela was advised not to return to South Africa by his sister Barbara and his parents. If Masekela returned home, he would perhaps be arrested. Apartheid Security Branch policemen were at his parents’ home looking for him after he left the country. Anyone who criticized the apartheid regime could be silenced, arrested, and detained indefinitely under the Suppression of Communism Act regardless of whether or not they had Communist beliefs. In addition, singer and activist Harry Belafonte convinced Masekela that he would become a mere statistic at home in the anti-apartheid movement. Belafonte told Masekela that he would receive more publicity and have a greater impact on the freedom struggle by protesting through music while living abroad.

Turning back to “Been Such a Long Time Gone,” several African images emerge in the song including the marketplace, caravan, Sahara, oasis, and the River Nile, as he remembers his homeland. The lyric “Been such a long time gone, I’ve got to cross over” suggests freedom of crossing borders, a reconnection, traveling, mobility, and a metaphorical united rather than fragmented self, which is torn between the host-land and the homeland. The image of white soldiers opening fire with their guns presents a stark contrast to the natural images of the hot sun and desert and suggests colonial rule and oppression. At the song’s

ending, the tempo becomes faster, which suggests the excitement of getting closer to home.

Masekela's fame also increased in 1974 when he collaborated with Stewart Levine, his former roommate from the Manhattan School of Music, and singer Lloyd Price to produce the three-night music festival prior to the "Rumble in the Jungle," a heavyweight boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) planned by boxing promoter Don King (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 275, 285). The music festival connected some African-American artists including James Brown, B. B. King, Bill Withers, and others with their roots in Africa and African musicians including Miriam Makeba and Ladysmith Black Mambazo (Masekela 283, 285). A film about the concert and the boxing match brought global attention to Zaire.

In 1984, Masekela composed "Bring Him Back Home (Nelson Mandela)," which became a popular song of hope for the nation's freedom from apartheid. Lyrics of this song came to Masekela in Botswana after he surprisingly received a card for his forty-fifth birthday from Nelson Mandela. The card was smuggled out of Pollsmoor Prison where Mandela was incarcerated at the time. Nelson Mandela (1918–2013), a fan of Hugh Masekela's music, gave him encouragement for the mobile recording studio and music school that Masekela had founded in Botswana with Khabi Mngoma (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 338). Masekela's father, Thomas Selema Masekela, a health inspector, told his friend Winnie Mandela about these accomplishments, and Winnie later relayed them to Nelson Mandela in prison. Also, Mr. Mbatha, the father of Masekela's ex-wife Jabu, was Mandela's former "schoolmate at Fort Hare University," and, perhaps, he told Winnie as well (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 338). Masekela was so moved by the birthday wish and encouragement that he went to his piano and spontaneously sang the lyrics: "Bring back Nelson Mandela/Bring him back home to Soweto/I want to see him walking down the streets of South Africa/I want to see him walking hand in hand with Winnie Mandela." These words relate to Soweto, the place where Nelson first saw Winnie as she waited for a bus. Soweto also refers to the Mandelas' home at the address of 8115 Orlando West, Soweto. In addition, the lyrics suggest Masekela's hope for Mandela's freedom and the reunion of the man popularly called "father" of the anti-apartheid struggle with his wife Winnie.

After returning to the United States from Botswana, Masekela and his Kalahari band members (from Ghana) recorded “Bring Him Back Home” for the *Tomorrow* album in 1987. Although the song using Mandela’s name was banned in South Africa, it became the international anthem for the Release Mandela Campaign. The song kept Nelson Mandela’s image alive during his absence from the public gaze while he was incarcerated.

“Bring Him Back Home” became a message of hope for Nelson Mandela’s freedom when it was performed by Masekela during Paul Simon’s 1987 and 1989 *Graceland* tours throughout Europe and the United States. Later, the song accompanied Nelson Mandela on his world tour after his release from prison. Hugh Masekela continues to end his concerts with “Bring Him Back Home” in tribute to the revered leader of the anti-apartheid movement and former South African President.

After the *Graceland* tours, Hugh Masekela’s fame increased in 1989 when he participated in the musical production for the Broadway play, *Sarafina*, which was written and composed by Mbongeni Ngema (Masekela 346). *Sarafina* exposes the violence of the June 16, 1976 tragedy known as the Soweto Uprising in which approximately twenty-thousand black high-school students protested against Bantu education and the apartheid government’s decree to use Afrikaans as the language of instruction in schools rather than English or their own native languages (du Preez 2011, 163). During the actual protest, police fired at children who had been peacefully demonstrating, many of whom were injured or killed.

Another protest song related to the Soweto Uprising of 1976, “Soweto Blues,” was composed by Masekela and recorded by his ex-wife Miriam Makeba. It was banned in South Africa until 1990, the beginning of the dissolution of apartheid legislation. The song includes anti-apartheid lyrics and the words “children being shot,” suggesting pathos with the massacre of high-school students who were killed by the Security Branch Police instead of protecting them.

In 1990, after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison, and the government’s unbanning of political parties, Masekela’s sister Barbara called and told him to return home. Barbara eventually became Nelson Mandela’s “chief of staff” in charge of “managing his life during this transitional period” (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 351). After living in self-exile from 1960 to 1990, Hugh Masekela returned to his homeland during September 1990.

Masekela was finally free to visit his mother's grave and blow his horn in tribute to her (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 351).

Later, Masekela celebrated his homecoming with the song "Ikhaya Lami," which he performed for his seventieth birthday concert titled *Welcome Home to South Africa* at London's Barbican Concert Hall in 2009. Although he did not write the song, Masekela's played the trumpet with the London Symphony Orchestra and St. Luke's Community Choir. The words *ikhaya lami* in the song's title mean "my home" in Zulu, and it is also "a song about homesickness" (www.HughMasekela.co.za). After such a long time away, it is a fitting tribute to Masekela's birthday and his return to his country.

Clearly, Hugh Masekela's horn and voice had a powerful impact on the freedom of South Africa's people and the country's transition to a democracy with the election of 1994. In his autobiography, Masekela wrote that singer Miriam Makeba encouraged him while living abroad to help the people "suffering back home in South Africa," and she made him aware that he could bring about "changes against apartheid through music" (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 130). Despite the pain of exile for thirty years, Hugh Masekela always remembered the people from his homeland. Since his return to South Africa in 1990, Masekela has done much for his people, including the establishment of a drug rehabilitation program. On April 9, 2015, Hugh Masekela received an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University in Grahamstown for his expansive career and commitment to the music of South Africa (<http://www.musicianAfrica.net/hugh-masekela>).

While continuing to blow his horn of freedom, Masekela has remained a voice for the oppressed and an inspiration to the South African people. In his words:

Let the music play. (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 376)

Works Cited

du Preez, Max. 2011. *The rough guide to Nelson Mandela*. New York: Penguin Group.

[<http://www.musicianAfrica.net/hugh-masekela.>]

“Hugh Masekela: The Official Site,” accessed April 3, 2017.
www.HughMasekela.co.za

Kubernik, Harvey, and Kenneth Kubernik. 2011. *A perfect haze: The illustrated history of the Monterey International Pop Festival*. Solana Beach: Santa Monica Press LLC.

Masekela, Hugh, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, Public Broadcasting System, 13 August 2009.

Masekela, Hugh and D. Michael Cheers. 2004. *Still grazing: The musical journey of Hugh Masekela*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Musinguzi, Bamuturraki. 2012. “I always say a note is a note in any language.” *Daily Nation* (5 January 2012).

Poole, Shelia M. 2004. Q&A/Hugh Masekela, musician and activist: ‘Freedom is very sweet’ in S. Africa; Jazz great’s life now open book. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (26 May 2004).

Wren, Celia. 2012. In Hugh Masekela’s “Songs of Migration,” a fantastic voyage. *The Washington Times*. 19 October 2012.