

# Tony Allen & Jeff Mills

**Start time:** 8.00pm

**Running time:** 90 mins no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

## **Chal Ravens explores the backstory to techno legend Jeff Mills and iconic drummer Tony Allen's collaboration ahead of their performance**

Jeff Mills and Tony Allen are two masters of rhythm from very different musical worlds. As a pioneer of Detroit techno – tough, minimal, yet infused with the fluidity of jazz and funk – Mills helped establish the drum machine as one of the most familiar musical building blocks of the past 30 years. And as the architect of Fela Kuti's hypnotising grooves, Allen has been the life-force of Afrobeat since the 1960s, an endlessly innovative drummer whose influence spreads through hip-hop, new wave, punk rock and beyond.

Allen and Mills came together in 2016 in Paris, the city where both now live. For their first rehearsal, Mills brought his Roland TR-909 drum machine over to Allen's studio to see if their idiosyncratic styles could find common ground. The encounter turned out to be much more than a casual jam session – instead, it was the beginning of a tentative, two-handed interaction that has continued to evolve with every performance. 'Everything [Allen] does is part of a conversation,' Mills said in 2017, recalling their first meeting, 'once I knew that, then I knew how I could meet him halfway.'

For most drummers of course, collaboration is inevitable. Like Allen, Mills has frequently worked with ensembles, from jazz-fusion quartet Spiral Deluxe to the Montpellier Philharmonic Orchestra. But what happens when two drummers try to follow the same beat? Against Allen's shifting, sliding rhythms, as if in an intimate tête-à-tête, Mills brings something different out of his machine in this collaboration. Exploring the spaces between Allen's circular grooves, he tests the limits of his cyborgian relationship with the 909 and in doing so reveals its musicality; far from being rigid and robotic, the drum machine becomes a fluid, responsive instrument.

This effect – a blurring of organic and synthetic, human and machine – perhaps only seems unusual because of how electronic instruments and digital music technology have developed since the 1980s. This collaboration is 'getting back to playing electronic instruments the way they used to be,' Mills has said, 'before MIDI technology trapped electronic musicians inside a grid.' Freed from MIDI – the technical standard that allows computers, synths and samplers to connect, but traps them in tick-tocking time code – Mills's on-the-fly programming is an intuitive reaction to Allen's improvisations. A drum roll from Allen's sticks is echoed by the 909 and back again, opening up a rarely heard conversation between different musical paradigms.

Their exchange has reached right down to the micro level, with Allen teaching Mills about the personal symbolism bound up in each of his drum hits. In the cultural melting pot that is Lagos, Nigeria's capital city, everyone speaks several languages, switching as necessary in order to be understood. As Mills learned, Allen understands his own playing as a response to Nigeria's complex social patterns; rhythms are interrupted and switched every few bars, as if in conversation. Listen closely for the snare: in techno, it's the reliable time-keeper and groove-builder. Under Allen's sticks, it jumps from beat to beat as the rhythm goes on, each movement changing its relationship with the hi-hat and the kick drum: a melting pot of language and culture expressed through the kit.

Brought together, the duo's rhythms merge into a single organism, rounded out by gospel-tinged organs from Allen's bandmate Jean-Philippe Dary, viscous dub basslines and sci-fi echoes from techno's past. The hi-tech jazz first imagined by Detroit's Underground Resistance has been reincarnated in an unexpected form. After the 2018 album *Tomorrow Comes the Harvest*, a lasting record of the duo's live chemistry, Allen and Mills are now into the third year of an ongoing collaboration. The music they make together remains as inquisitive and inventive as at their first rehearsal, but as natural as a conversation between old friends.

Produced by the Barbican

## **Performers**

**Jeff Mills** – electronics

**Tony Allen** – drums

**Jean Philippe Dary** – keys

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