

# An Interview with Fela Anikulapo Kuti by Don Snowden July 24, 1984

# FELA'S LAST PHONE CALL

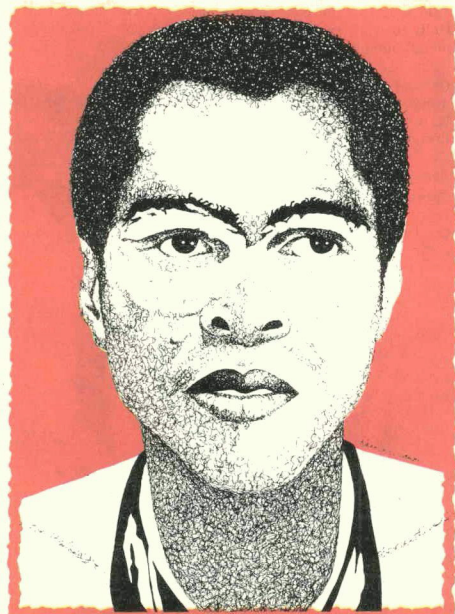


Illustration by Rameses © 1984

Don Snowden talked with Fela Anikulapo Kuti in London by transatlantic telephone just before Fela returned to Nigeria to prepare for his tour to the U.S., where he was to appear in a massive Third World music concert with the Mighty Sparrow and Peter Tosh at the Hollywood Bowl. Although his band did make the trip and performed several shows in America, Fela never left Lagos. He was detained at the airport by the Nigerian government for alleged currency violations, and, at press time, had just been sentenced to five years in prison, a 1,000 naira fine, and forfeiture of the £1,680 he had tried to take out of the country.

**Do you feel a kind of kinship, a kind of connection, between people like Tosh and Sparrow and yourself?**

Oh, yes, I feel very attached to black people all over the world because I know they all belong to Africa. That's how I feel about black people, especially when I meet artists that are very aware of people's suffering. I feel very close to them.

**Who are some of the artists that you feel close to in that way?**

Let me take, for instance, the U.S. I feel close to Gil Scott-Heron but I've never met him. I like his style.

**Yeah, Gil's pretty cool. I have met him. He's a real good man.**

Yeah, I liked Bob Marley when he was alive but I never met him, too. I felt cool towards him, you know.

**So you feel that music should have that mixture of musical value and also lyrics that have something pertinent to say about the state of the world?**

Yeah, for me, the artist should be the light of the world because artists are much more professionally spiritual. They allow their minds to be and they should be the dictators of taste. They should be more aware of human sufferings all over the world and that should be the concept of their work.

**That seems to run counter to a lot of the people out here in Hollywood where the whole thing is being a big star and running around with flashy clothes and cars and the whole bit.**

Oh, look, I don't mind flashy clothes or cars. If an artist makes money, I want him to use the money the way he likes, it's cool, but his work must be geared towards humanity. That's how I feel. I wear flashy clothes myself, but the clothes doesn't change the man.

**Are you surprised that there's this new interest in African music in America?**

No, I'm not surprised because I believe that Africa is the home of music and the reason Africans aren't being very exposed are two main reasons. One, through colonialism and through education, and the other reason is through the colonial masters not allowing African music to flow to the world because they don't want people to know the truth about Africa. The leaders of Africa, not being aware of the importance of the cultural and traditional spiritual aspects of the people. This has been the main blockade towards the growing of African music. But when it comes to African music — I mean good African music because some people play at African music, which is due to the education, too, but what I'm talking about, good African music, I didn't see any doubt that it would reach the world, you know. It just had to take time so I'm not surprised at all that people now are starting to recognize African music.

**Right. I remember back in the '70s, a lot of people were saying that you were going to be the one that would bring it through to people outside Africa.**

Yes, that's probably correct. That was because I'm aware of myself and my tradition. I know what I'm doing with my continent's music and I know what I want to achieve it with and I intend to reach the world with it. So the people that think that way, they're not very wrong because I believe I'll be the main instrument for it.

**What do you want to achieve with your music?**

I want to achieve a few things. First of all, the Africans have not been allowed to contribute their knowledge to this universe. The Africans are the only people today who have not been able to use their knowledge for human benefit due to suppression. I think the African concept is the concept of the future. It's a concept that will save the world from its unnaturalness, the artificial ties that we have with our beings. Africa will be able to create a new knowledge of naturalism, the new force of the future, spiritualism, being able to create through higher forces, being able to treat ailments of the body by natural means and not through chemicals, being able to create a new dimension towards justice, to freedom, being able to have a new science. I think Africa in the future will be able to do this. Africans are not being able to do this today because of the concept of being subjected and oppressed by so-called big powers. This is my message, that Africans should be allowed to develop their own cultural, traditional, spiritual force so it can help humanity. That is my message. That is what I want to achieve in my music. And I also want to achieve my own involvement in the leadership of my country because being the leader of my country I'll be able to put this oppression really into proper working aspect.

**Why did you decide to get actively involved in politics? A lot of people will talk about wanting to change it but to actually try and get elected and be involved in that political process is a little unusual.**

I didn't really want to get myself involved in politics at the beginning. I only wanted to create an awareness of my music, but as time went, I saw that it was important for me as a man to be involved in politics. After all, the lawyers and doctors and all these people involved in politics are human beings but I think today, now, they are probably the wrong human beings that are doing these things. The right human

beings should be involved in the people's lives, involved more in people's society and I think the artists are the best persons to do it. I see no reason why me as a musician can't be president and really do the right thing. I see the importance of being a man to really participate in politics, not just create awareness. I want to really get involved in it and that's how I see a complete change for my people. If I'm preaching something, I must be able to, as a man, stand in front and lead what I preach and try to put into machination what I have as a concept.

**Is the situation in Nigeria easier for you now politically? I recall reading about possible visa troubles a year ago, and obviously, there was the attack on your house several years ago.**

It's very difficult for me to say now. As a matter of fact, the government is trying to lure me into participation in the politics of Nigeria now but that doesn't really mean that my situation is very cool with my government. I've not been able to release any records in the last nine months. This is because we can't get raw materials in Nigeria to make records so it's very difficult for me to judge how the government feels about me and what and when they want to attack me. On the whole, all these things I don't care about at all because in the first place I know nobody can kill me. I have no reason to fear any danger at this stage of my life but that's sufficient now. I don't really know but the government at home now are not positive, not positive towards the kind of ideology I want.

**Turning to the musical area, well, Afro-beat to me sounds much different, style-wise, than most of the other African musics I have come to hear. There aren't as many guitars, more horns, things of that nature. How did that sound evolve?**

In the first place, now I don't call my music Afro-beat. I call my music African music but my music really evolved from tradition, my study of the cultural tradition of Africa itself and that is how I got my sound. You see, most negative things have been propagated about Africa a long time ago, that Africans have all these heavy things but really, deep down in spiritual forms and the cultural diagrams of my continent, that is what is really Africa dating from the time of Egypt. These are the kind of things that make Africa great, harmony and the beauty of music. I insert it in my concept and right in my music. But you see, most artists in Africa today, through education, have not been aware of their cultural environment. They have not been encouraged to study the deepness of their spiritual background but I, on my own, have taken it on myself to study these things and it has evolved in my music.

**“Africans should be allowed to develop their own cultural, traditional, spiritual force so it can help humanity. That is my message.”**

**How do you go about putting together your music? Do you start from a melody? Do you have a particular rhythm you want to work with? Is there a particular lyric line you come up with and build the piece around?**

I write the melody of my music last. I write differently. I may possibly start with a rhythm concept. I may start with a bass line concept. I studied music in Britain for 4½ years and I know how they teach us to write music. My own kind of writing music is not of the same style. I have a completely different aspect of writing music. Sometimes I can write music by . . . by . . . by . . . the state of the clouds, possibly. I can even write music from the voice of birds in my

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hometown. I could write music from marks on the walls, anything, but I don't write music the way conventional people write music today.

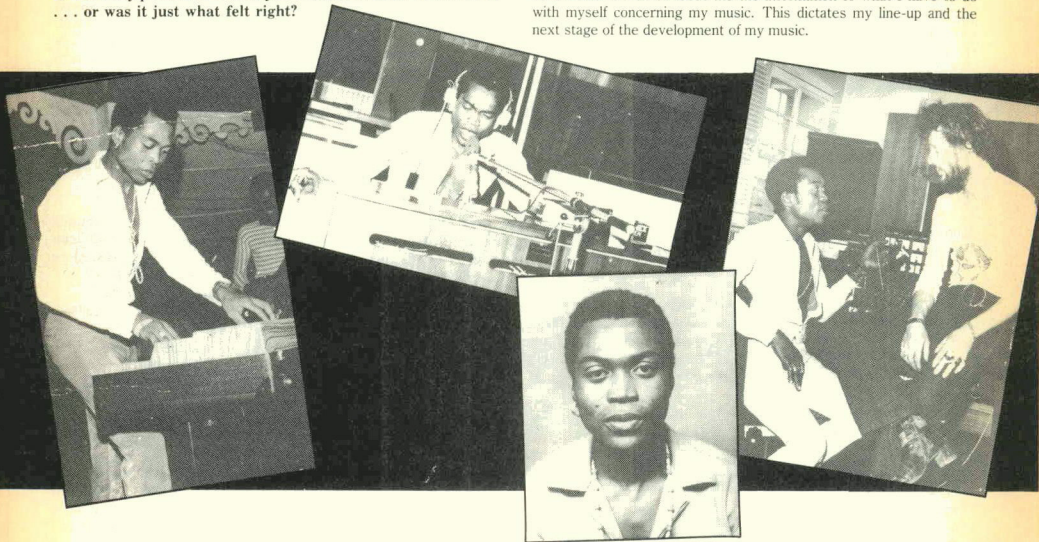
### What turned you towards music originally?

Oh, since I was a small boy, I think I was born to play music. It's a gift from higher forces.

### Which instruments did you start with?

Every African plays the drums but then I went to the piano, then trumpet, then sax.

### Is there any particular reason you went on to those instruments . . . or was it just what felt right?



I just felt that way. Something just attracted me towards those instruments. Something just pushed me towards the sax. I never thought I would ever play the sax but one day I saw an old saxophone. I had an old saxophone one of my musicians had left in my room and one day I had it for repairs. The person brought it to me for repairs and put it by my chair and I looked at this instrument and said, "Well, let me look at this instrument today." I put it on my lips and I liked the sound so I tried to learn it.

**You're coming to the Hollywood Bowl, playing to people, a lot of whom probably will have never heard your music. They might be coming for Peter Tosh and may be familiar with reggae but that might be the extent of it. Is there anything someone who has no knowledge of your music could focus on to kind of get into it and make it easier for them to understand?**

For me, I don't have any problem in that situation. For me as an artist, I see the world as one world, different races but all people are human beings and everybody is gifted with two ears to listen to what they hear. I see music as a human thing. For me, if you play the right music for the human body, every man's ear picks it up and the body reacts to it. I don't see any reason why I have to burden myself with what people will feel about my music, or anything like that. I just feel

**Is it difficult to find musicians to fit into the concept?**

I'm playing to give my beats and I'm playing a fine African night of good African music. That's what they're going to listen to and if people have two ears, I see no reason why they won't react to my music.

### In what ways do you think your music has evolved?

Oh, I don't know. I sit down in my house and I think what sound is going on in my head. You see, for me as an artist, what goes on in anybody's head as an artist is controlled by higher forces in the environment. You understand? A musician just doesn't use his brain thought. The brain is there to pick up messages from higher forces and if you are gifted through birth, through a culture, to play music, these forces are there to feed you with information to play or work what you are gifted with. I believe that this period surrounding my involvement in Africa feeds me the information to what I have to do with myself concerning my music. This dictates my line-up and the next stage of the development of my music.

**I don't find it difficult to find musicians to fit into my concept because I write every thing in the band, from the drums to the horns. Everything, I write it myself and I have to teach everybody what to play so it really doesn't matter who plays in my band.**

### So you don't write for particular players?

No, I don't write for particular players. I write for myself.

### Is there any prospect of some of your music being released in America again soon?

I don't know what happened with my double album we released here but I want to release another album, if possible. We're trying to arrange that with EMI. EMI is a good company but they're not giving enough support to what I'm trying to do for my liking. They're not really pushing the music as I would like them to but maybe in the future I can get them to do that. But for me, if you want to push new music as they push new music in Europe, they're not doing enough for me, not for my liking. But it doesn't discourage me. I'm just mentioning it.

*Don Snowden is a writer who reports frequently on reggae and African music for the Los Angeles Times.*

## Fela Anikulapo-Kuti . . . Still Suffering

Grass, Randall

*The Beat*; Dec 1984; 3, 6; International Index to Music Periodicals Full Text  
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PHOTOS, OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Fela at his Afro Spot Club, Yaba, Lagos, November 26, 1970, with new keyboard; Recording vocal track at a London studio, 1971; Passport photo, November 1970, prior to trip to Ghana; Fela and Ginger Baker in London, 1971, working on lp. ABOVE: Fela's original band, Koola Lobitos, at Citadelle d'Haïti in Los Angeles, 1969. (Photos courtesy of Sandra Isidore)

Photos courtesy of Sandra Isidore

## Fela Anikulapo-Kuti . . . Still Suffering

When the first rumors surfaced hinting that Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Nigeria's Afro-beat king, would be making his first U.S. appearances in nearly fifteen years, it seemed too good to be true. Yet the rumors persisted and soon definite dates were confirmed for shows in Los Angeles, Berkeley and New York by individual promoters and Fela's management. With Capitol Records issuing both Fela's great *Black President* lp and his brand-new *Live* lp (recorded in Amsterdam on his last European tour with Egypt 80), it looked as though Fela was at last ready to step forward and claim his rightful place as the recognized standard-bearer of innovative, committed African pop music. Unfortunately, it did turn out to be too good to be true.

The first signs of trouble surfaced when dates had to be pushed back from August to early September due to immigration problems. According to Pascal Ingber, of Fela's management, the requisite paperwork for members of Egypt 80 somehow lost their way in various American diplomatic channels in Lagos. When that obtained and the band prepared to leave. However, when Fela and his entourage arrived at Lagos Airport, Fela himself was detained, charged with various currency violations, even as his band boarded the plane. The plane never left.

The U.S. dates were put back another few days as various people worked feverishly to jump this latest hurdle. With Fela out on bail, all looked possible again, but he

chose that moment to call a press conference to denounce the Nigerian government's actions and state his feeling that his travel to America was deliberately being obstructed due to his outspoken criticism of Nigerian establishment institutions. Fela was again arrested under military government law which prohibits un-authorized public criticism of the government. Fela nevertheless told the band to go on to America and play the dates if he did not arrive in time.

Fela's Egypt 80, led by his son Femi on vocals and saxophone (Femi has been playing with the band for some time now) did play shows in Los Angeles at the Hollywood Bowl, in Berkeley at The Greek, and in New York at a small club called Pizza Au Go Go. Audience reaction tended toward subdued disappointment. The band departed New York for Lagos right after their September 7th New York gig.

—Randall Grass