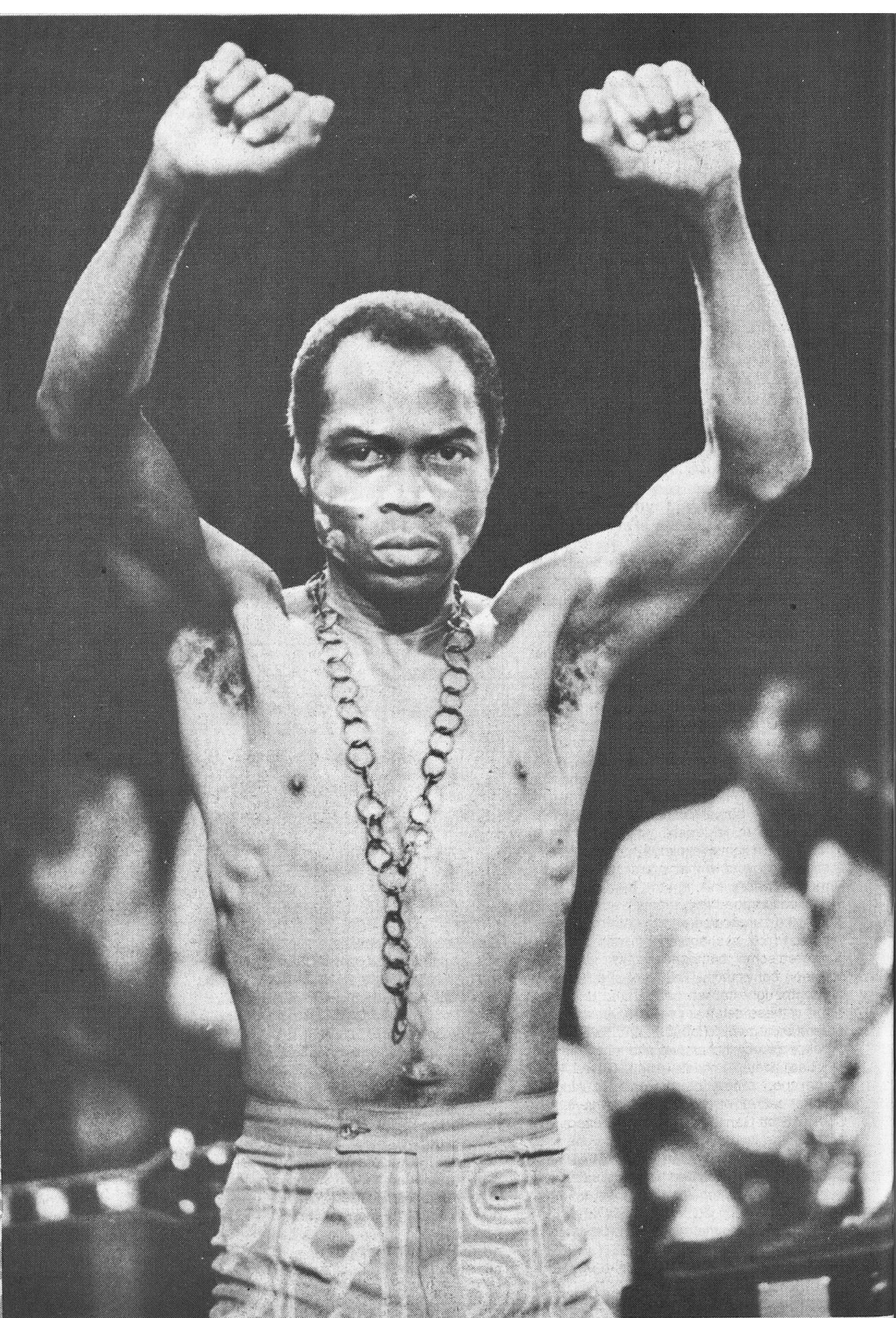


FEELAISFREE



**Nigerian
band leader
released
from prison**



Compiled by Tom Cheyney

Afrobeat superstar Fela Anikulapo-Kuti was released from prison April 24 in Lagos, Nigeria, after serving some 18 months of a five-year sentence on trumped-up currency smuggling charges.

Fela, an outspoken critic of the system in his home country, had been arrested and jailed in September 1984 for allegedly attempting to smuggle 1,600 British pounds out of Nigeria on the eve of a planned North American tour.

The accusations against him were widely perceived as outright fraudulent. Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience in light of his apparent persecution and prosecution on politically motivated grounds.

He had been detained at least five times since 1976, according to Amnesty International, on criminal charges reported to have contained some political overtones. He had not been convicted on any of these occasions, though he was ill-treated during some of these detention periods. This time he was convicted, following a dubious trial.

Fela's especially hard attacks on various Nigerian military governments played a part in the intensity of some high-ranking officers' hatred of him. Former Nigerian Chief of Staff Gen. Tunde Idiagbon supposedly said he would "make sure that Fela is jailed . . . and I hope he will rot in jail."

The judge who presided over Fela's court case admitted recently to having been coerced into the guilty verdict by the previous military regime, of which Idiagbon was a part.

The May 12 issue of the Nigerian news-

weekly magazine *Newswatch* contained an exclusive account of Fela's life in prison, in his own words. Here are some selected excerpts from Dele Olojede's interview with him.

"A simply humane system is the only thing that can change these things. But when prisoner dey, he no fit get milk, he no fit get cigar easy, he no fit get better chop,

he must find a way, and those means are secret to prisoners, because they are illegal.

"Communication line in prison; if I describe it to you, it is bad for prison. We prisoners can never tell you how we get our money in. Nobody will tell you because once they do, government will know and they won't allow prisoners to enjoy these facilities. It is our own private prisoners' institution we have created for ourselves that makes us able to get things into prison."

Fela discovered that the survival of humans in detention or incarceration takes on individual dimensions as well as group ones.

"No matter what a human being is, whether he is a criminal or not, when you see him in a kind of situation where he has successfully passed through that test which you are about to go through, you must respect him."

Even within the prison system, some relief could be found in a different facility.

"The treatment of prisoners in Kirikiri Prison is better than most prisons. Warders don't hold batons in Kirikiri, for instance. They seem to be livelier with prisoners."

Kirikiri would be the site of the lion's share of his imprisonment. His stay at Ikoyi

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FELA: "I BELIEVE THAT SUFFERING HAS A PURPOSE"

Interview With Randall Grass, May 3, 1986

Political music. No one in Nigeria likes to do political music now because the political situation is very bad. Africa is not like Europe in any way. If I can go to jail for 18 months, think how long an ordinary musician would go. But people want to hear political music. There are a few boys trying to do it, but it is not easy to do political music. If you do they clamp you down. At one time I was to play Zaire, but I was not allowed into the country at all . . .

I'm not for instance your average politician. I believe in higher forces. If you do they suffering has a purpose. I cannot suffer like this for no reason. I'm not working for any selfish reason or ulterior motive. I'm working for the improvement of my fellow man so I have nothing to fear. I suffered a lot but I feel fine now. I'm happy for the suffering because I believe it's opened the eyes of many people. People finally

know the honest of my struggle and also found out the potentiality of my leadership. People now want to hear what I'm saying.

International opinion. Oh yeah, it had a lot of effect. Yes, but I would like to suggest to these international movements like Amnesty, that all these governments in Africa make their efforts almost fruitless. If the United Nations as they're supposed to be appointed to do these things, had a lot more power, that would be better although international agitation over my case had effect. It made people aware that the government was wrong, that is all, but it was not effective in gaining my release. If I had not exposed the judge I would not be out of prison yet. It was unconditional release, that means I have no record, no conviction; I did not commit any offense.

Free at last: Fela unchained

FELA IS FREE

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Prison, his initial holding area, numbered but a few weeks.

Music played a large part in his musings on the future. Though some thoughts could bring the spirit down, they also brought up that life force — Fela's music.

"For me, I just sit down there and refuse to think. Blank, but sometimes, thoughts just come to my mind, and when it does, I think most about the future, what I will like to do. But then, when you start to think about the future, it's good. But you get tired thinking about the future because what you are thinking there is no avenue to put it into practice in the near future.

"So I usually thought about the design of my band and how I am going to play new heavy music."

The thousands of mosquitoes and flies at Maiduguri Prison — "I have never seen so many flies in my life." — the third institution in Fela's jail trail, caused him to note the effect of the clouds of pesky bugs on his music.

"It will also affect my music a lot. My music is going to change. It will still be Fela, but people will hear dynamic sounds, you know. Like my band now, I am going to use two bass guitars, instead of one . . .

" . . . To put two bass guitars in music is not easy. One has to resolve the riddle, how effective it would be. I managed to sort it out in prison. But I cannot talk about it now until the music is on the ground because it is an experiment really. I also want to add those big conga drums that are as tall as human beings, for some special effects. What I sing about and how would I sing would also be affected."

Furthermore, the hardship of "hard time" exposed the blunt edge of Fela's muse in meditation. "What I hear in my head is so heavy that I am afraid to play it."

Soon after these thoughts of heavy future tunes, good news came into play, like a dream.

"When the coup happened I was in my cell sleeping, since me I normally sleep during the day. Then one boy come wake me up. I was very angry. Then he say: 'Fela, Coup! Coup!'

"I said, 'What coup?'

"He said, 'They don' overthrow Idiagbon.'

"I no believe am. He come tell me say make I come outside, say everybody don' hear the news. Then me I come out, see plenty people for yard. Everybody they jubilate. When I see say na true dey talk, I jumped up and shouted, 'Say the mother--- don' go at last!'

"From that day, I became impatient in prison. My mind was outside."

Though the news of the coup was welcome, Fela became quite ill with a peptic

ulcer (now completely healed). He refused to go to the hospital because his brother Beko was coming to visit. But "I was feeling so terrible. I said, 'So, man no go see Beko again today.'"

While in the hospital, Fela heard the news of his brother Koye's appointment as minister of health in the new regime. And a surprise visitor came to see him — Justice Okoro-Idogu, the presiding judge at Fela's trial.

"He said he wanted me to know that he did not mean to jail me. That the instruction came from higher quarters. That even after he jailed me, he wrote two letters, one to Buhari and one to Idiagbon, that they should release me."

Yet Fela did not hold a personal grudge against Okoro-Idogu. "You see, I really pity the judge. I don't have anything against him as such, because he is not the issue. The whole f----- rotten system is the issue. The judiciary is the issue . . . Out of all the judges we have in Nigeria, 99% of them are corrupt, dishonest, useless."

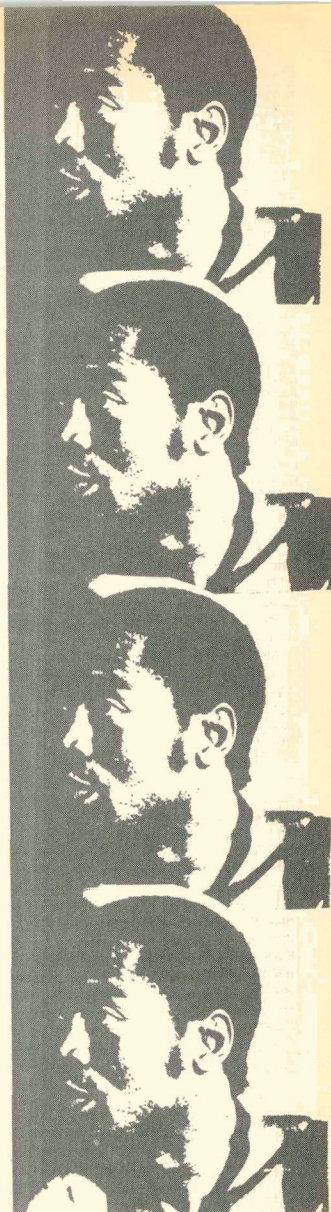
After his hospital stay, he was transferred to Benin Prison on Jan. 8, 1986, an action that displeased Fela, because: "Going to Benin would mean that I have to go through the whole b----- all over again — I had to set up a new internal communication network, to enable me get things I needed in prison."

By this time Fela knew his days in prison were numbered. But the pain of detention was not over. "I had the worst part of my prison term in Benin, because of the anticipation of my release. My mind was completely outside, and that made it frustrating."

Finally the news came of his release. And Fela felt pure joy for the first time in nearly a year and a half. "Can you imagine, after so many months of planning the future in your head and you stopped planning for the future because you are tired of thinking, then suddenly they come and tell you that you are released. Suddenly all the future plans you have just burst forth into your brain; your whole body is full of . . . vigor! Happiness. And all you've been putting in your mind, you are going to start putting them into operation."

Fela will start putting his musical ideas into action this year. He is making plans for some European concert dates this summer, with a fall U.S. tour in the works. He has been practicing some new songs about prison with his band at the Shrine, his Lagos club. He has already appeared, in a non-musical role, at the Amnesty International benefit concert held at Giants Stadium, East Rutherford, N.J.

As his manager, Pascal Imbert, told *Rolling Stone*, "He's definitely ready to go." ★



(Sources for this report were: *L.A. Times*, *N.Y. Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Bam*, *The Punch*, and especially, Amnesty International and *Newswatch*.) ★