FEMI KUTI

By Ron Sakolsky
Photos by Ade James

Interviewing Femi Kuti at his hotel room in Chicago's Loop prior to his performance at Africa Fête in the summer of '95, I was struck immediately by his outspoken self-assurance and determination. These two qualities are, of course, not surprising given that the legendary Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Nigeria's unofficial Black President and sometime political prisoner (now free), is his father. Yet the downside of his paternal lineage is that he is constantly cast in the elder Kuti's shadow. At the time of this interview, armed with a tight and energetic touring band, an opening berth in the Africa Fête lineup, a fresh contract with and a new self-titled recording for Motown Records (which has now unceremoniously dropped him without comment), Femi seemed poised to conquer American audiences. In this endeavor, he has quite adeptly managed to pay homage to his father's musico-political heritage, while simultaneously expressing his own younger generational take on Afro-beat and the Nigerian political situation. In so doing, he has transformed his father's overarching shadow into a luminous halo for his own abundant talents as a saxophonist, lyricist, vocalist and bandleader.

Ron Sakoksky: Let's talk a little bit about how your musical development as an artist is connected to being brought up in a household of music. What were your early musical experiences at your father's communal compound, Kalakuta Republic, and at his club, the Shrine? How did that all come together for you in making you into the artist that you are today?

Femi Kuti: I remember when I was about 18, my father gave me a trumpet, and one of his musicians at that time taught me the scale of C major, but that was all he taught me then. When I was about 11-12, he bought this piano, and when I was about 16 he asked me "Don't you want to play music." I said "Yes." "So what do you want to play?" I said, "Saxophone." He gave me saxophone. Still no tutor. Then after some time he told some musicians to teach me, and one taught me for about two weeks. Then I said I will need to go to England. He said no, I should go Ghana. My mother said England. He said Ghana. After about a year of lessons, Roy Ayers [American jazz vibist] came through. I played with him. They had a concert in the National Theater, and I was watching. I just felt this urge to be on stage that night: "I want to play, I want to play." He said "You want to play, have you learned how to play your instrument?" I said no. He said, "Go and learn first."

The tour was for about two months. During that time I now set to practicing. He wrote down some numbers for me to go and learn. So I managed to play them. Just before the tour I did the recording *Music of Many Colours* (Celluloid 6125) with Roy Ayers. I started like that, but he never sat me down and said this is how to do this, or this is how music is. I just sat down watching every night, looking at him, how did he hold the horn. You know?

He said things like, "You must listen to Miles Davis, listen to Charlie Parker, Coltrane and Duke." Things like that. And I listened to it, but I couldn't understand what jazz was about. It was like, what's this? I went back. "Ah," he said, "Now, go and listen, and think deep when you listen to it." I was more into the music I heard at the discotheque and things like that, but after some time I could hear what they were playing. "Ah, this is strange." I started hearing some sweet melodies. "Ahhh, so this is what jazz is about. So similar to African music." I learned the history of jazz. "Jazz comes from Africa. Ahahh." It was so much like traditional music. I saw the direction my father was coming from. Calypso and salsa are all like African music. You go to the villages in Africa, and the rhythm of the music is so similar.

Since jazz is African, there must be something deeper than jazz. I listened to the final works of Coltrane and Miles, and I saw they were playing something very very close to Afro-beat. Because it had a steady bass line, never changing too much. It wasn't every four bars they were changing, like jazz. It was just that you had the big horn section, and the congas behind them. Miles said in his book, he listened to Fela, and was changing towards the end his career. So I now said, "Okay, in that case, since this is happening, let me just stick to my roots. Let me get my inspiration directly from Africa." And I stopped listening to jazz. I just started practicing, listening to my father, listening to traditional songs. That's how I started my music.

Q: What connections did you see with African traditional music? Are you talking about traditional Yoruba music?

A: Yes. Traditional, but not just Yoruba...Could be Ibo...

Q: West African?

A: African, just indigenous African music.

Q: In terms of some of the connections you were making with jazz, how was the improvisational element different in jazz than in African music?

A: I think with jazz the Africans here were maybe trying to complicate music for the European listeners. Of course, maybe when the Europeans caught up and could play jazz then they felt, "Oh, we must play something else." Jazz was always getting more and more complicated. And then Miles and Coltrane saw that they were losing the soul in the music. They were getting very technical. Whereas if you listen to earlier jazz there was more soul. The blues, that's even more African than jazz. You can't say it's just sorrowful music. It's more like from within the person. So when the person says, "Ah," you know he really feels that.

Jazz is complicated music. You have to be very brainy. With jazz you must know your instrument. You must know what that instrument is about. It is one, two, three, four, two, two, three, four. Chords everywhere. You have to be like a robot. There was not a human feel. Whereas in Afro-beat, African music, the chords change, the harmonization, the rhythm changes, but they do not change as much as in jazz. In jazz, with every bar there's a new chording. It's very complicated, but I think music is about simplicity. It's about simple chords. You get a very nice melody that you can immediately catch on to. What African music is about is everybody being able to sing a melody along with the artist. That is the difference.

Q: About participating...

A: Yeah, because African be, "The more the merrier." If you can get people singing along with you the better it is for you. You feel the vibration is stronger then. So that's the importance of our indigenous music. You see the African folk song is about people all singing together. Somebody starts a song and everybody sings together. That's it. See, but with jazz, it's going to be very hard. You give a layman that and he will say, "What did you say?" The artist

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can understand where Charlie Parker or whoever is coming from. And, it's definitely *good* music, of course, but it is just that for the average ear, it is complicated. African music, deep African music, is about simplicity. If it's a very good melody, you dream about this melody. It catches on immediately. You just have to have the right chord, the right bass line, the right rhythm, and then you've got a groove.

Q: What are some of your early memories of the Shrine?

A: I'm still there now! When we were *young, and the radio* was always Michael Jackson, Temptations, Diana Ross, Donna Summer, that's what we're listening to. Before I even caught on to my father's music, I was like in my late teens, I never heard it on the radio. I only saw him once in a while. We were brainwashed with funk. It was when I was in the Shrine that I realized that what was happening there was very different. So I started going to the Shrine regularly, and I felt myself drifting away from funk and listening more to my father.

Q: What was the scene like there?

A: People were high on grass. It was fun. There was so much *freedom in the air. It was very* important. People were friendly. There was a lot of love in the air.

Q: These days is there anything like that happening?

A: Yeah, these days it's happening like that. I play there on Sunday. Fela plays on Fridays and Saturdays. It's still there. Grass is there definitely. Everyone is smoking.

Q: You mention that your father's music wasn't played on the radio—is your music played on the radio?

A. His music actually does get played, even though he banned them from playing it, because they were never paying copyrights for it. They just wanted to play it for free. They are still doing that in Nigeria.

Q: Is your music on the radio?

A. Yeah. My music is on the radio.

Q: Who listens to your music? Young people? Is it your fathers' audience? Who listens?

A. I think everybody listens to it. My new album, on Motown, I think everybody is going to love that album. At first nobody wanted to give me chance, because I was Fela's son. They said I must do exactly what my father is doing. They thought that if I was going to take over playing Afro-beat, I must be like Fela, smoke grass, have a lot of women around me, and if I'm not going to do all that, I can't be Fela's replacement. I said, "Look, I don't intend to be Fela's replacement, I'm playing my music."

Q: You're your own person...

A: I'm not even going in the direction my father is going. I'm going completely different from where he's going. I must find my own life. I must do my own thing. About two years ago an album of mine came out called *Mind Your Own Business* (Mélodie 34002-2), and also since I play regularly at the Shrine now, I have followers behind me. If you tell them I'm not an artist, they will kill you, man. So Nigerian people get in arguments. . . . One person says, "No, Femi can never play." Another says, "Have you listened to him lately?" "When was the last time you heard him?" "1989." "'89? What about lately?" A big fight would just erupt, you know. So my Nigerian critics are going to get shocked. When they hear this new album in Lagos, they're going to die of a heart attack. "This is Femi, *impossible*."

Q: So what is this new direction that you're going in?

A: It's just that I feel what I play. I come from Africa, my inspiration comes from Africa. So it's definitely African music and I know my roots. They say it sounds like calypso, it sounds like jazz, and I tell people, "Where did all this music come from, it comes from Africa." So you cannot say I get it from the West. I dream about the music. While I'm practicing I hear this big sound behind me. That's where I get my music from. It's not from listening to jazz or calypso, or anything like that.

Q: So if you had to differentiate it from your father's music, what would the difference be?

A: First, my music is more direct, more to the point. My father plays a number for about an hour now, his music is very relaxed. His music is more spiritual, I think. He has been playing much longer than I have, but I am a better saxophonist definitely. He doesn't even play the sax anymore. Because I want to play music as well as make money, I will not play a number for that amount of time. I can understand the European mind, or the Western mind. They don't want to spend an hour trying to make up their mind about whether they like this number or not. Whereas the African man, he's ready to digest it for an hour, listen to the same rhythm. They believe the longer it is the better it is for them. It's like if they are making love, they never would want to make love for five minutes. They would want to make love for an hour. So if they are listening to that music they are ready to listen to it for an hour.

So okay, I find this melody, *I get this rhythm*, I have what I want to say; I can say it in five minutes. Then I hear another rhythm, OK, cut it off, end there and start another one. It might even be the same song, but, now with the knowledge I have, I can break it down, change a lot

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of things, nobody will even know I'm coming from the same direction. Just cut everything down. I can get five numbers out of one number. No problem. I feel more comfortable being direct on stage. The bass or the horn, come in immediately. So it's not like we're daydreaming on stage anymore. It's very precise. I think the audience appreciates that more. A lot of people who have watched my father say, "Ah your band is very tight, very direct, precise." I think this works for me. I'm very comfortable with that. I don't think I could play a number more than 10 minutes.

Q: In terms of the politics of your music, you mention on your new recording, things like African unity and revolution, some of the same things that we've heard your father say. What is your take on those things? Is it any different?

A: That's another aspect he really inspired me on, politics. He got me very involved in politics. In my home environment, he made me read lots of books concerning African history and leaders who have done things for Africa. So that's why I think all my numbers on the album are about African unity, the suffering in Africa, or the corruption of our African leaders. I used to go around with him. He used to go and lecture the university students. He had about 60 lectures all over Nigeria. So I really got involved in politics. I really feel it's time for Africa to unite and the youth especially getting informed about the development of Africa. So that's why I sing about it.

Q: What would that mean for Africans to unite, what would that look like?

A: That would mean we would all start thinking alike again. That would mean we can make money. That means that we will end corruption. That would mean free travel across borders. Now, it's easier to come to America than to go from Nigeria to the next country. It's like we're enemies. Colonization makes us hate each other so much. People don't even see, I'm Ghanaian, you're Nigerian and that's it. Nobody even wants compromise. The culture is similar. Europe is even united now. They see the need to unite, 'cause they see if they don't unite they're going to have problems in the future. Why can't Africans see that? Africans have been discussing this a long time, since the '60s, with Kwame Nkrumah. Every day the governments walk farther away from the reality that they have to unite. I think it is important for us as a continent. If Africa unites, its going to be better for Europe and America too, because then they can come and they can see the true African country that should be. What they see now is an Americanized Nigeria, an English-speaking Ghana, a French Cameroon or Togo. They cannot see being African.

Q: Their minds are colonized...

A: Yes. It's important for Africans to find themselves again. It's very important.

Q: What is the political situation like in Nigeria these days?

A: This subject is giving me stress. Right now a lot of leaders come here and say America should bring sanctions against Nigeria. I want to ask them just one question, if America should impose sanctions, if Canada should impose sanctions on Nigeria, who suffers, the government?

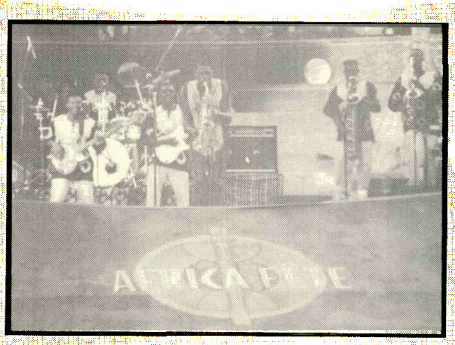
Q: The people...

A: Thank you very much. Those who are asking for the sanctions are all in Europe right now, hiding. They are all rich. They can survive. Their families can survive. Now they are asking for sanctions to be brought against the people of Nigeria. The Nigerian government has money all over Europe. Europeans can freeze their accounts in Switzerland, can't they? So why are they asking for the penalty of sanctions when they know it is the people that will suffer? And they who are asking are not going to be part of the suffering.

As to [Moshood] Abiola, the man they all fighting for, there are rumors that he works for the CIA. There's a magazine that came out saying the American Embassy says he was their "boy-boy," that is a slave for the CIA. OK. This man has been involved in every government, taking contracts from them. His wealth came from the government. He worked with ITT. He did telephone communications that didn't work properly. Babangida asked him "Come my friend, you are the only one I can hand over power to." Abiola has not said one word against Babangida. For the eight years Babangida ruled Nigeria and he was destroying Nigeria, Abiola was his best friend. He was taking money from Babangida. He made his money from this. He ran for president, and Babangida canceled the election. He said it was because he had said, "Don't spend your personal money on the election." It is now said that this Abiola spent one billion dollars on the election, bribing everybody.

Nigerians thought that if he became president, because he has the Americans on his side, America would just come up and pour dollars into Nigeria. So they have this illusion. He's selling our lives again. This is another form of slave trade. These "pro-democratic" people, my uncle included, don't see this. They say, "No, the military must go because it's easier to fight the politicians." But what the politicians do will be worse because they now bring in the police force like the last civilian government. And now they lock you up. The dictatorship of the civilians is worse than the military. The military wear their uniforms, so we know who the enemy is. The civilians they're in the same clothes as us and there are thousands. You have the legislators, the vice president and the governors. With the corruption of the civilians, my God, Nigeria will go down faster than it's going down right now. They see this, but they still say it's going to be easier. I ask them, "How can you fight for a man that's done absolutely nothing for the development of the Nigerian people?" He just woke up one morning and said he wants reparations. After how many years? Why didn't he fight Babangida when Babangida was still president? He didn't fight him when he was killing the country. He's part of the problem of this country. He and all of the politicians of Nigeria.

How can you serve under a military government? Even one of my uncles refused to take a job. Most of Abiola's supporters have been at one time or the other part of the government. I can understand fighting the military, saying the military must go. But don't fight the military for somebody that you know is going to be worse than the military. You know the damage this set of civilians would do to this



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country. I'm very much against the military. My father is against this president and the military. But then, the other people that want to take over, my god. They want the military out at all costs. They want American sanctions. Yet many of these people calling for sanctions have been locked up for embezzlement. Now they are pretending to be the saints of this country.

The problem is deeper and the corruption is too much. The people must realize that it's their problem. We have to solve that problem ourselves. And we cannot solve it when some people are saying fight for someone like Abiola. The military and Abiola have been husband and wife from day one. So why do they want a divorce? Because the wife wants to claim half the property of the man. Ha, ha, ha. We don't want that. We want them to be married. Let us know who they are. The masses must know who the enemy is, and they are the enemies. So when the revolution comes we know who to point the finger at. And now what I think Africans should focus on is unity. When the Ghanaian man sees he and the Nigerian are the same, then the governments will shake. They will be forced to open the borders. Why can't there be unity in Africa?

Q: In terms of what you just said about knowing who the enemy is, I know you've been very outspoken here, naming names; in your music, in your songs, do you name names too? I know your father does that, and it has gotten him in some hot water in the past, including prison time.

A: I name Abiola's name and Babangida's name. Yeah. [General] Abacha's name is in the song, "Stubborn Problem." I say we have a "Stubborn Problem" with his government. I'm not as direct as my father. I'm only direct when I have interviews, not in my songs. I think that is because I have not had any cause to be direct, I've never been arrested. I've never been beaten. Anytime I've ever been arrested or beaten was when I used to stay with my father and they come to arrest him, and I got caught up in the arrest. But never on my own. They know I'm in politics. I'm outspoken about my views, but no government has really come against me. Maybe they think I'm too young or I'm talking a lot of shit.

Q: So it sounds to me that as an artist, as a musician, you've been able to be as outspoken as you want to be. Your musical emphasis seems to be on the positive side, unity and building the kind of Pan-African consciousness that you've been talking about.

Let me ask you something that is related. You know the magazine that I write for started out as a reggae magazine and I know that your music is politically conscious and positive like reggae often is. What do you see as the relationship between the contemporary Afro-beat that you do and the music of the reggae scene in Nigeria?

A: I think the problem is that Nigerian reggae artists all want to be Jamaicans. Somebody that comes from a village in Nigeria starts playing reggae. The press find out and asks, "Where you from?" He says, "I am from Ethiopia," and he's really from somewhere in eastern Nigeria. He lies. He starts speaking this language, Jamaican patois—where did he learn it from?—tv. He doesn't even know where the international airport is. So that is the mentality of a lot of the artists. While a lot of them too are now finding their roots and trying to be very African, reggae dominates the scene so that everything is crazy. Everything is reggae. The radio stations have been flooding the markets with reggae, and never giving those of us who were being original any chance. Now, it was Europe that first accepted me because I play Nigerian music. I was the only band traveling out of Nigeria to Europe. The Nigerian people could not understand, if this guy is not good, why does he keep traveling to Europe? Nigerian reggae artists never travel, but they don't even speak their own language anymore. You ask their name and they say, "Ras something, something." "What's your name?" "I don't have a name," they say, "That is my name." "Your mother gave you this name?" "Yes, my mother.". . . They lie. I think all that is wrong.

Reggae is definitely African music. All reggae artists will tell you it's African, they got it from Africa. But I think reggae is very simple. I like some reggae. I like Bob Marley's reggae. I like Third World. There are some artists that I really could listen to. But then sometimes it gets very monotonous. African music is about variety. If you listen to any Afro-beat song, you will hardly find more than two being similar.

Q: And your music has some complex arrangements.

A: Very complex. Afro-beat is complex, but not complex in the sense that you can't understand, not complex like jazz. Reggae is simple, just one guitar, a very nice bass line, good song, maybe some horn sometime. It's too simple for me.

Q: So you actually used to be the assistant bandleader with your father's band at one time, right?

A: Yes, I would tune the band, and get them ready before he came out. That was my job.

Q: That probably gave you a lot of the skills that you eventually took to your own band... Is that right?

A: With Fela, when he's doing a composition, then I'm watching 100%. I'm like, yeah, okay, ah, what does he do with his bass line? Wow, were did he get this from? Ahah! I remember when I first started my band, he came to watch me in '89, and he said to himself, he didn't tell me then, he said, "These boys are playing rubbish." Then he heard me in '91, and he said "Are you the same person I heard in '89?" We did a number called "Mind Your Own Business." It has a three-way horn section, the saxes are doing something, the trombone is doing something, the trumpet is doing something, call and response; merging together with a heavy rhythm section. Every day I was going to his house somebody would be in there, and I would hear him say, "Have you heard that number, this boy is mad, he's crazy. Did you see what he did in that number?" I would walk in and he would say, "I'm just talking about you. Ah, you are great, you are going to be a great man. Keep up the hard work."

Q: Are any of the same musicians in your band that were in some of Fela's bands?

A: My keyboardist, Dele Sosimi, is my best friend. We both played with my father's band. I joined in 1988, he joined in 1989. We left on the same day. I told him I was resigning and he said he was going to resign as well. I said, "Well, I'm going to start a band." He says, "Ah, I like the idea." Then we went out looking for the other artists together. We added about five other members who are the nucleus of the band, including two of my sisters as dancers and about three other members who have been there from the beginning, in 1986. In Nigeria, a lot of musicians are not dedicated to their instruments. In my band, it's different. All of the musicians learned from me. There is always, "Look, you must practice, you must practice."

Q: One final question. Apart from stylistic differences, for both you and your father, the lyrics are very important. Outside of Anglophone Africa, is there a problem if people can't understand the language, given your Pan-African aspirations?

A: A lot of English people don't speak French, but a lot of French people speak English. When we say Pan-Africanism, we're not talking about my music being the dominant African force. No, it doesn't have to be. Politics is different from music. There's so many different kinds of bands in African music. As you can see in Africa Fête you have Baaba Maal, you have Boukman [Eksperyans] and Oumou [Sangare]. They all bring something completely different from each other to the contemporary music of Africa. If you go deeper, there's so much traditional African music. The Yorubas are so different from the Ibos; the Ibos are different from the Hausas; the Hausas are different from the Fulani; and the Yorubas themselves are diverse. In my band, we are all *different* Yorubas, and everybody has a different culture in his background. There are 250 dialects of Yoruba in Africa. We are all different people, and have different musical backgrounds that we build our music upon. ★