



Q: How long did you play for Fela Anikulapo Kuti?

A: I started playing with Fela as far back as 1965 until 1979. I had the intention of being a freelance musician, then in 1980 I decided to have a band, which I called the Mighty Iroko — it means the biggest tree in the forest. Then I left Lagos for Cross River State or a six-month contract to lead a house band, 10 pieces, for a night club. We played strictly Afro-beat. Sometimes I dabbled into pop, reggae, just for the audience, but it's not really what I wanted to do, 'cause Afro-beat is my style.

Q: How was Afro-beat invented? What was the inspiration?

A: I had gone through all different type of rhythms, from jazz to classical, playing with brush... So when Fela came back from London in 1964, he was a broadcaster, at the Nigerian Broadcasting House, presenting a jazz program once a week. Later he found out it was better for him to have a group — a small quartet or quintet, so instead of him promoting or projecting jazz records, he projects himself. He does his own 30-minute program live on the radio. He called his group Koola Lobitos. I was in a different band at that time, but he discovered me to be one of the best drummers in Lagos. So he started using me on his jazz program, with his intention of making a different band later, playing highlife jazz.

Q: How did you meet Fela?

A: He had used two drummers already but he couldn't get what he wanted from them because he was into strictly jazz, and he knows the ability of the drummers he left behind in London, when he was studying. One day somebody told him there's a guy who can play better than these people, and he told me to come down and see him. I was playing with the highlife band, The Western Toppers Band, at the time. When Fela was ready to form his highlife jazz band in 1965, he decided to use me for that. He was playing original music, but at that early stage, people were not responding to it because it was a different thing completely, but he kept on doing it. Because he never went and studied music just for fun — he was creative.

Q: What was James Brown's influence on Fela?

A: Not until 1969, when we traveled to the U.S., based in LA for eight months, doing our own thing. A guy called Bernie Hamilton, a film actor, discovered us. We'd gone through a lot of shit trying to make it in L.A. as a club band, but we didn't have a correct visa at that time, and we weren't in the union. We were finally accepted and the union said we could play and live, but unless we joined the union we can't be

paid. Ben Hamilton gave us his club, the Citadelle d'Haiti, on Sunset Boulevard, and a house to live in. He took care of us until the man who brought Fela to U.S. got mad, said he didn't come to U.S. to play for Nigerian students, and there were plenty back home to play for — he wanted us to play for Americans. So they were crossed and there were problems. This guy went and reported us to Immigration, that we didn't have a work permit. Immigration gave us a voluntary permit, but we didn't leave. We asked for an extension, which they refused. Fela stamped his feet down — that he's not going to go nowhere 'cause he's not done anything wrong. We got a hearing and an extension of two months, because we were not "undesirable elements," so we stayed and did our recording, and then we went back to Nigeria.

In America, we never watched James Brown play, but we used to hear a lot of his records.

Q: Where was Sandra Isidore at that time?

A: Sandra was not singing with him then, she was just Fela's girlfriend. He was staying with her parents. She taught Fela a lot about American politics. When we got back to Nigeria, he started preaching Blackism and these things.

Q: How did your music change in America?

A: When we got there, we were playing strictly serious music. It was too much for commercial music, and for the audience. We found out that everyone was playing simple music and making money, so he decided to keep it simple, and he changed the style of composing, not like what he has now, 'cause what he has now is even simpler, but at that time it was really unique. It was influenced by what we heard in U.S. In 1970 it changed completely. It was Afro-beat. A guy in America, a Ghanaian named Duke Lumumba, he was a guy who paid for the studio time, so we cut our first record for him, *Black Man's Cry*, on Lumumba Records. It sold in Nigeria, but I don't know about America. I never saw any money for it. So we traveled back to Nigeria and we changed the music to keep it simple, and that was a hit. There was a record we recorded straight away on 45 single called "J'en Koku." So "J'en Koku" just hit the charts straight, and then from there we just started. Some Americans we were working for in the States changed the name from Koola Lobitos to Nigeria 70 until we got to Nigeria and Fela changed it to Africa 70. That was the name we recorded "J'en Koku" under.

Q: The Afro-beat sound was already there?

A: The drumming pattern of Afro-beat is the root of the music, the drum pattern and the bass line. Bass is the kind of instrument that anybody could play, but the rhythm behind it — it might not be easy for a white American to try to play, they couldn't get into this beat. There was a time in America when our bassist ran away, so we have to look for a bassist who can read and play. Fela wrote the music down for him. The guy could play the notes but he couldn't keep

up with the rhythm. So we had to beg our bassist to come back and finish the recording with us. When James Brown toured Nigeria in 1970, his music arranger, he's a white guy, he used to come and watch me playing my drums. He watches the movement of my legs and the movement of my hands, and he start writing down. He was just writing for rhythm sake, but to play it is going to be very difficult, because you have to be an African to play like that.

Q: Did James Brown's band ever pick it up at all?

A: They picked a lot from Fela when they came to Nigeria.

Q: And everyone thinks James Brown influenced Fela!

A: Well, it's like both of them sort of influenced each other. Fela got influenced in America, James Brown got the influence in Nigeria.

Q: Did James Brown ever come to the Shrine? Was there a Shrine then?

A: Yes — it wasn't called Shrine at that time. It was called Afro Spots. And they came and saw us play.

Q: When did you first get interested in playing an instrument?

A: I used to be a music lover, I liked going to clubs, and I don't watch anybody but the drummer. There are so many good drummers before I started playing. Then, I was a radio technician — I make my money from radio, and I go and spend it in the nightclub trying to watch musicians playing. I developed so much interest in drumming, so I said I've got to learn this instrument. Then I bought myself a drum stick and went and paid a drummer for my studies, and he started teaching me.

Q: How old were you then?

A: I was 17.

Q: So fairly late on — you didn't pick it up as a child?

A: No, there was no chance, although in school I was in the school band, playing drums. But then, I never look at myself as a musician, I look at myself as a technician, electronics man. But I started learning, and then I dropped it. It was tedious, going from work, going to practice, and I didn't even know if I'm going to work with it. Went back to it two years later, just for practice. About a year later, these Germans I was working for decided they didn't like my ways of dressing. I dress flashily, I don't like a technician, I just dress like a playboy. They would complain about my dressing every time. I told them I wouldn't change — that's the way I want to dress, so they gave me one more notice. So I just quit, immediately, and I joined a band, playing sticks for nine months. The drummer who was playing at that time knows that I know about the drumming too, so when he leaves to go and sing, I would take over the drums. So we did that for another nine months. So when the drummer left, the band leader said instead of going outside to hire a drummer, it's better I go on the drums straightaway, so I just started like that.

Q: What band was that?



Drummer Tony Allen was with Fela for 14 years, from the beginning of the highlife jazz band Koola Lobitos in 1964, and was instrumental in the evolution of the distinctive style that came to be called Afro-beat. Now his solo career is blossoming with a new record, keeping the sound of Afro-beat alive.

TONY ALLEN

The Soul of Afro-beat

*Interview by CC Smith
July 31, 1984, London, England*

A: Victor Olaiya and the Cool Cats. A highlife band, we played all styles, classical, jazz, highlife, music composed by the leader. This was in 1960. When the band broke up, I was upset. This was what I was living on. Then I said no more music and went back to my radio, did that for another six months. Then this guy came and asked me to be the drummer for a new group, convinced me there was nothing wrong, come back! So I went back and I started playing again. From there, I've not stopped.

Q: What was the new group?

A: Agunoris and the Heat Waves. From there I went to the Nigerian Messengers, the Melody Angels, Western Toppers, and Koola Lobitos.

Q: You put out some records on your own while you were with Fela . . .

A: I did three records with Fela's band. Fela played on them. The first was *Jealousy*, then *Progress*, then *No Accommodation*. Fela didn't like my trying to do my own thing. He was thinking that, "this guy might change his mind, as soon as he discovers he can arrange and compose, he might abscond one day." I just took it as one of his things, and just keep on doing it. Until I just discovered that this guy (Fela) is a real slave driver. He never paid what he was supposed to pay his musicians. That was when I decided I've got to call it quits, because I can't continue like that — everybody is growing, not retreating — so I just stopped. I knew if I didn't stop, I wouldn't be able to forward my own ideas. So I stopped, and started from scrap.

It was very difficult. I told Fela when we were in Berlin that I was going to resign when we got back to Nigeria. Fela went into politics. He was telling me that the money we make in Berlin, he was using on politics, and he wants to be elected as the president of Nigeria.

Q: He was serious about that?

A: Oh yes. And then I told him I am not a politician, I'm a musician. So I left and started wading through myself.

Q: Why are you living in London? What's the attraction?

A: Because they listen to a lot of good music here, and if you can make it here, you can make it worldwide. Back home, the recording studios are so busy, recording all this indigenous African music and copyrights, people play reggae, pop, Michael Jackson, all this stuff. They think Fela is the only person doing Afro-beat . . .

Q: Well, up until now, he was the only one. Nobody else could copy it. You're the only other person who *could* play it!

A: Yes, I'm the only one because I happen to be part and parcel of that contraction. So Fela is playing Afro-beat, but Fela cannot play as he wants to play if I'm not around, because he *thinks* about the drummer every time he writes music. He knows that drumming is the *root*.

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TONY ALLEN

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Q: Can his new drummer handle the beat?

A: Ten drummers cannot stand by my side! They don't know how it happens, they don't know the tricks of that particular beat.

Q: Did you go see Fela when he performed in London recently?

A: Oh yes. I was supposed to be on the tour with him. I was hired by the promoters. I met them in Paris, and they told me to bring in Fela, and they wanted me to play his drums. I said it's going to be very difficult because five years now I've left him and I never went back. Although when Roy Ayers came to Nigeria I did play one track that he composed straight in the studio there, "Africa Center of the World," but since then I've been trying to do my own thing. Because I knew he was a dictator, and I cannot cope with a dictator. I don't want him to take me for a ride, I'm not a fool, I know what I'm doing. So he must be thinking, that guy's a fool, and he wants to ride me like a horse. So I had to leave.

Q: Are you still on speaking terms with him?

A: We speak. I go to his house. We talk — we talk a lot. So when we go there there he was telling me that he has four drummers, that he's on a very tight budget, that he doesn't know how he's going to pay me. I tell him not to worry about the money, because I was hired by the organizers. Still, he refused.

Q: You have a track on Sunny Ade's new record, "Oremi." How was that, working with him?

A: That came about when I was in London in January 1982 to buy some equipment for my band back home. Martin Messonier was my friend back in Nigeria. They brought Sandra to Nigeria to record Afro-beat for Island Records. She went and met Fela. Sandra needs eight tracks for an album.

Fela told her, unless she would wait eight months, for eight tracks, one track every month, he wasn't going to do it. Sandra was pissed off, and the whole situation in the house was so boring to her. Then she came and met me and she said I learned you have a band, and I'd like you to help me, write me some Afro-beat tunes for an album. That was when I met Martin. Tee-Mac wrote six of the Afro-beat tunes and I just wrote only two, "Traffic Jam," and another one. And Martin said he was going to record my own band later. He met me before in Lagos to record with Sunny on the first album Sunny released for Island Records. There was a conflict when I got to the studio in Lome. I just didn't dig the members of the band. So I just told Martin in the studio I'm not recording with these guys around. I begged him, I said you should just forgive me. So when he called me, in London, I went to his house and he said "Guess who's in town?" I said, "Who?" He said, "Sunny Ade. He's going to the studio tomorrow," and they want me to be in the studio with him. I say, "With his boys?" He said "No, not this time, it's only Sunny," just two of us. I said, "Cool." Then we went into the studio the next day and worked on "Oremi." I just do everything. I play the drums, the bass line, the tenor guitar, and said that's enough as a backing track. He can take it back to Nigeria and join his group. I played on all the tracks, but "Oremi" was the one I wrote, which is "My Friend."

Q: Sunny Ade has one musician, though, Bob Ohiri, who you probably know because he played with Fela.

A: Bob arranges the guitar works of the tunes — he got the ideas from Fela. Because, since Sunny Ade started going to Afro-beat — you know he's a juju musician but he has infused it with Afro-beat — Ohiri had that knowledge of Afro-beat so he just started helping. Ohiri is one of the out-

standing musicians in that band, different from all those "local" ones. He had his own band before he joined Sunny's band, with his brother.

Q: Your new song, "Never Expect Power Always" — do you sing on it?

A: Candido, a friend of mine, he's been working with me for long, he sang on my second album, *Progress*, and *No Accommodation* — *Lagos*, and *No Discrimination*.

Q: Who are you using in the studio on this new record?

A: I am using Jamaicans — Victor on keyboards, bass line and the DX-7. The horns are Jamaicans too, they play with Aswad. They gave me a tough time because African music is not easy, African rhythm is not easy, they weren't used to it. They were used to reggae. Reggae is so simple. Afro-beat is not simple. I think I can make use of them live. I'm trying to put together a band in London. All I need is my work permit, and then I'll just start.

Q: What's in the future for you, Tony?

A: I have a goal. My goal is to have a hit record. I stopped recording five years ago, and I have a lot of materials to record. After having four albums to my credit, I am not rich. Maybe it is not the right time. Fela played on my first three lps. I am trying to divert from what Fela has done. Fela never believes in electronics, gadgets, but I believe in it because it makes your music sound good, if you know how to use it. I have my own style of Afro-beat. Fela has his own, raw, style. Mine is not raw. It's been difficult but I've learned a lot. I can make band anywhere, anytime, and I'm going to play my own stuff. If somebody is expecting me to play something by Michael Jackson or Lionel Richie or James Brown, they're joking. I am going to play my own stuff, whether they like it or not. But I know they will like it. I want to make a hit. I want to make dance music, music when you just hear it, you jump on the floor. ★

RAS ROJAH

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assault by the police, and that the fingers were merely a minor after effect. The musician now faces between 12 and 15 years imprisonment for currency violations as he was leaving for the ill-fated Los Angeles Hollywood Bowl show in September (the police found money in Hindu's clothing). Protests should be addressed to the Nigerian Embassy in Washington . . .

Reggae Superjam in Kingston, Dec. 13-15 promises to be the best winter show the island's ever seen, and a chance for reggae fans to explore the heart of the city that gave the music its birth. L.A. reggaenauts can travel once again with Minister of Transportation, Tom Linton, who's taking us to Negril for three days, then to KGN for the Pulse Production's festival . . . May your whole-l-daze be joyous. One Heart.

—Roger Steffens

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