

AFRICAMAN FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI ORIGINAL

BY CARTER VAN PELT

A dark and somber cloud crept over Africa on Aug. 2. Tears flowed in Nigeria, in Africa and all over the world. Hearts became leaden. Many wished it hadn't happened. Some accepted it as part of a divine order. Anyone who was conscious of it at all recognized it as the end of an era. The battle hardened, and seemingly invincible African music legend Fela Anikulapo-Kuti was dead in Nigeria at 58 from heart failure related to

AIDS. To the pan-African world, Fela was a towering figure who arguably combined elements of pure artistry, political perseverance and a mystic, spiritual consciousness in a way that no other individual ever has.

Musically, he achieved a level comparable to Miles Davis, James Brown, Theolonius Monk and Bob Marley. In other respects, he was similar to Peter Tosh or Sun Ra. Politically, he subscribed to the point of view of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X and Kwame Toure. Spiritually, less is known about Fela, except that his spiritual vision grew from his belief in the sublime power of musicians.

"The world should mourn," said engineer/producer Dennis Bovell, who recorded eight albums worth of material for Fela in the mid-'80s. "The world should mourn, especially the African world, because one of its outspoken has spoken. I hope another one comes along straight away to fill the gap. Otherwise everything's going to be hush-hush and swept under the carpet, and a lotta injustice is gonna occur."

"We didn't expect it," said Nigerian reggae/Afropop star Sonny Okosuns, shortly after hearing of Fela's death. "We've been very great friends since 1969 when he came back from America. We [musicians] studied him seriously. He's been a very strong force to reckon with, and he will continue to be a strong force to reckon with. He will be remembered. We hope that he will rise again."

Fela Ransome-Kuti was born on Oct. 15, 1938 and raised by a Christian family of means in the town of Abeokuta, Nigeria. "My father was very strict," he told journalist Roger Steffens in 1986. "I thought he was wicked. He kicked my ass so many times. It was tough in school under our father. That's how he understood life should be, 'cause he read the Bible: 'Spare the rod and spoil the child.' My mother, she was wicked too. She kicked my ass so much man—systematic ass-kicking. [But] on the whole, they were beautiful parents, they taught me heavy things. They made me see life in perspective. I think if they had not brought me up with these experiences, I do not think I would have been what I am today. So the upbringing was not negative."

Fela left Nigeria and studied music at Trinity College in London from 1958-62. In 1960, Nigeria gained its independence from England in no small part due to the activism of people like his mother, Funmilayo—a central figure in his Fela's life. Fela married his first wife, Remi, in London in 1961. While Fela studied classical music at Trinity, outside school he studied and played jazz. The first recordings of his band Koola

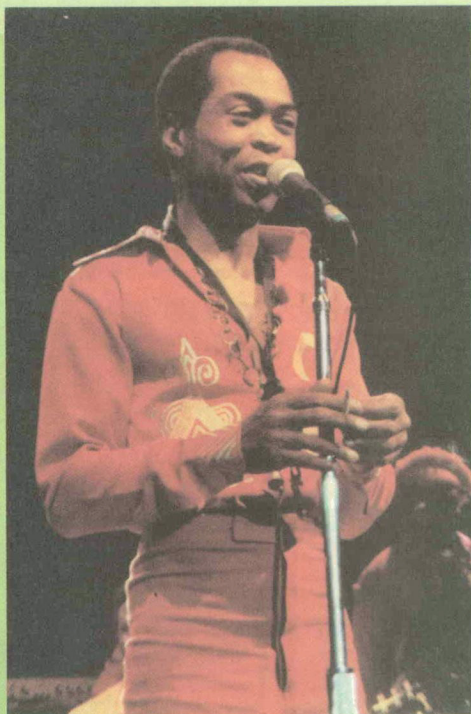


PHOTO BY ADE JAMES

Lobitos are rumored to date from this period. His first verifiable recording was "Aigna" as Fela Ransome-Kuti and His Highlife Rakers in 1966. He also recorded several titles under the name Highlife Jazz Band in the mid-to-late '60s, and there was a full Koola Lobitos album released by EMI in Nigeria in 1969.

Fela's journey to Los Angeles in 1969 was the most formative experience of his life. In L.A., he met a young Afri-centric woman named Sandra Smith, who exposed him to the consciousness then sweeping black America. She gave Fela a copy of Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and unknowingly sent him on his way. "It was incredible how my head was turned," he told the *New York Times* in 1977. "Everything fell into place. For the first time, I saw the essence of blackism. It's crazy; in the States people think the black power movement drew inspiration from Africa. All these Americans come over here looking for awareness, they don't realize they're the ones who've got it over there. We were even ashamed to go around in national dress until we saw pictures of blacks wearing dashikis on 125th Street."

"I wasn't aware I was sending him," says a proudly reflective Sandra (Smith) Isadore. "I was being myself and so happy that I had met an urban African. I was trying to get to my roots in 1969. In my own mind, they [Africans] didn't have a struggle. It came to me as a surprise when I was in Nigeria [in 1976] and Fela gave me this credit," cause I had not given the credit to myself." In L.A., H.B. Barnham recorded the highlife jazz sound of Fela Ransome Kuti and the newly renamed Nigeria 70. Those recordings, recently released by Stern's Africa on cd, are the earliest document of Fela's work currently in print. In 1971, EMI financed a session in London at Abbey Road studio, which became *Fela's London Scene*. At this point, Fela's musical career became focused, directed, and it exploded in terms of quantity and quality of output. It was the beginning of his own style of music—Afrobeat.

Over the next six years, Fela and the again renamed Africa 70 would record some 20 albums that are the bedrock of his musical legacy. Classic titles such as *Shakara*, *Open and Close*, *Gentleman*, *Alagbon Close*, *Expensive Shit*, *Confusion*, *Upside Down* and *Kalakuta Show* established a standard of intricacy and musical ferocity seldom equaled. While Fela himself was not a sensational sax or keyboard player, his compositional skill and ability to assemble and direct crack musicians was the essence of his art. While the whole of the Africa 70 band exuded talent, the trumpet playing of Tunde Williams and the drumming of Tony Allen in particular exemplified some of the best musicianship in Africa.

Dennis Bovell echoes the thought. "I would say he was Africa's number one. He was a great composer, and that's more than a musician. The composers compose shit and any musician can play it. I think he was a great composer, full stop."

THE FALLEN GIANT: PERSONAL REMINISCENCES OF FELA KUTI

Compiled by Robert Ambrose

As rumors of Fela's death began to circulate the cyberworld, Dave Hucker and I exchanged reminiscence notes about the African music giant and his impact on our lives. After he died and commiseration in The Beat community and beyond became pervasive, it became clear that our experiences were shared by many. Below are testimonies from fellow Beat contributors and friends.

I collided with Fela in my brother's New York apartment around 1982, when my sibling dropped I.T.T. (International Thief Thief) on his turntable and left for his job. I was "on leave" from my work in Nicaragua, and Fela's indictment of international capitalism, driven home with awesome percussive strength, immediately resonated with me at a time in life where I saw the brutal effects of imperialism every day. "I.T.T." became a foundation stone for my musical obsession, a pivotal sound that joined with Franco's sublime rumba and Akendengue's lyrical brilliance to build the hunger that never ends.

I was fortunate to see Fela perform twice. Once, I watched the pre-show set-up and sound check: Fela was all business, ordering his troupe around like

slaves. Then, minutes later, he strutted around like a peacock in front of the packed house, directing the overwhelming aural barrage before stopping to deliver his tirade of the moment.

Fela's music continues to resonate. Last week my radio program consisted of four songs: "Sorrow Tears and Blood," "No Agreement," "Colonial Mentality" and "Beasts of No Nation." They generated a record number of audience calls from people who wanted to hear more. ¡Que viva Fela!

—Robert Ambrose

DAVE HUCKER

I will always thank Fela for introducing me to African music. A friend who had been in Nigeria working on the oil rigs came back with *Shakara*. At the time (1975-76) I was on a voyage of musical discovery 'round the Carib-

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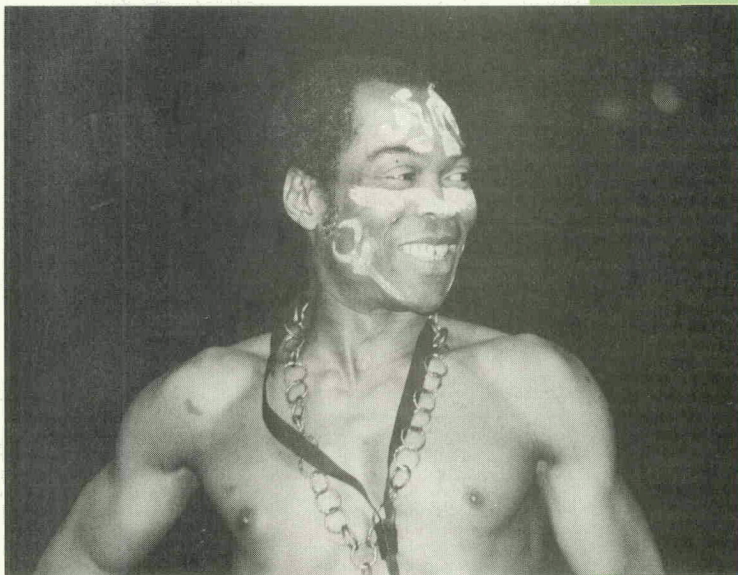


PHOTO BY LEM SINCLAIR

Reminiscences

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bean; Africa was far away, but interesting. I had not realized just how close the connections were.

I saw him a couple of times in the '80s, when he was at his best. I remember a great session in London where Fela's witch doctor killed a man on stage by cutting his throat, then buried him out back of the venue. Then two days later he resurrected him. Beautiful! The punters had to pay twice for the spectacle, once for the killing and once for the arousing: brilliant. A friend, then a music writer, encountered the guy who had been killed and buried in the ladies' toilet after the "bural." Cleaning the mud and soil off himself, he invited her to go back to his hotel room with him.

I always remember Fela being made to wait to get into my club. We were very busy, full up in fact, and operating a one-out, one-in policy.

"Do you not know who I am?" asked Fela to my doorman.

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In 1974, after the first police attack on his commune (later named Kalakuta Republic) in the Surulere section of Lagos, Fela's resolve and militancy were reinforced, and it was directly reflected in his music. "I refuse to live my life in fear," he later said. "I don't think about it. If somebody wants to do harm for you, it's better for you not to know. So I don't think about it. I can say I don't care. I'm ready for anything." He changed his name to Anikulapo-Kuti in 1976 to shed his colonial name and emphasize that he was "one who holds death in his pouch."

Fela needed death in his pouch to survive the second major assault on his commune. Several significant events led to the infamous day. In addition to the increasingly anti-authoritarian tone of his music, Fela purchased a printing press and was distributing an anti-government newsletter by the end of 1976.

attacked Kalakuta in an infamous and brutal display of barbarism that left Fela severely beaten, with broken legs. His followers were similarly brutalized, the women raped. His mother was thrown from a second-story balcony, hastening her death. For Fela, it was truly time for musical war. The event ignited retaliation in the form of "Sorrow Tears and Blood," "No Agreement," "Zombie," "Vagabonds in Power (V.I.P.)" and "Coffin for Head of State." Fela defiantly marked the anniversary of the attack with a traditional marriage to 27 of his female followers.

Fela's recording career changed with his spiritual outlook in 1981, when he had a vision in a trance. "[Before 1981] I was spiritually aware, but subconsciously spiritually aware," he told Roger Steffens. "It was a trance—very spiritual and real. It was like a film. I saw this whole [world] was going to change into what



PHOTO BY SEAN O'NEILL

Fela's dancer/wives were an important, and controversial, part of his live show.

"I don't care who you are," my man said. "You wait like everyone else." He waited. Then when he actually got in he sent one of his lady friends over to ask me to play some Fela music! Heh heh, what an ego.

He also publicly boycotted FESTAC 77, the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, and in so doing blatantly criticized the dictatorship for its corrupt dealings with multinational corporations (Shell Oil, ITT, etc.).

On Feb. 18, 1977, the Nigerian government tried to completely break the incorrigible Fela. One thousand soldiers

people call the Age of Aquarius: The age of goodness where music was going to be the final expression of the human race and musicians were going to be very important in the development of the human society and that musicians would be presidents of different countries and artists would be dictators of society. The mind would be freer, less-complicated institutions, less-complicated technologies. It

was in that trance that I saw the aspect of the Egyptian civilization. The whole human race were in Egypt under the spiritual guidance of the gods."

On the political front, Fela formed the Movement of the People (M.O.P.) party and entertained the idea of becoming a democratically elected president of Nigeria. The spiritual revelation precipitated the name change of his group from Afroba 70 to Egypt 80, and he slowed the Afrobeat groove to a more meditative pace and mellower mood and generally referred to it as "African music" thereafter.

While his musical output in the early '80s was also slowed and his skepticism of record companies grew, he struck up a trusted relationship with Linton Kwesi Johnson's musical partner, Dennis Bovell, who recorded Fela live in Amsterdam for release on EMI in 1983. Bovell also recorded the original tracks for Fela's ill-fated *Army Arrangement*, which was completed by Bill Laswell at the urging of Fela's manager Pascal Imbert, while Fela was imprisoned in Ikoyi and later Kiri-Kiri prison on a bogus currency-smuggling charge. Since Fela received so much recognition as a result of his imprisonment, the album was widely exposed, but without Fela's consent.

"It was an idea I had to get Fela to play with new sounds, but not to change his composition," explains Bovell. "I just wanted him to play what he played, but with new equipment. Those guys, they didn't understand. As I told them, 'you wait till I finish with LK [and I'll finish the album]. They were like 'we gotta go now, man. The iron's hot, we gotta strike'—total record company shit. They changed the whole shit to what they thought was new. And they fucked it up. [When] they snuck a tape recorder into the prison, and they played it to [Fela], he was like, 'Motherfucker! Who's that!?' Especially when he heard Bernie Worrell replace his own organ solo he was deeply pissed. 'Take that off. Take that off! I don't want to hear it!'"

Fela was released from the internationally publicized prison term in 1986 after 18 months. He toured the U.S. several times, slowly fell out of circulation and withdrew to himself and his communal circle at the Ikeja Street residence in Lagos. Fela would only release a half-dozen more albums (half of what he recorded with Bovell remains in the can). In his final years, Fela continued to play at The (new) Shrine, but the recordings tapered off. "The thing that bothers

me more than anything is that before Fela transcended, he was doing a new music," says Sandra. "And that music was never recorded. Maybe that music was not for the world to hear. Only for a few. He just felt like he didn't need anyone to exploit his music, so he refused to record. Fela even told me in 1991, 'Why even bother?' I've said everything. It's all been said. It's all been done."

Fela's back catalog of over 75 albums remains largely out of circulation with only nine legiti-



Fela with Sandra Isadore and Ginger Baker during Fela's 1986 visit to Los Angeles.

mate cds on the market, four from Shanachie (*Black Man's Cry*, *Original Sufferhead*, *Beast of No Nation* and *O.D.O.O.*) and five from Stern's Africa (*The '69 Los Angeles Sessions*, *Fela's London Scene*, *Open and Close*, *He Miss Road and Underground System*). Randall Grass of Shanachie Entertainment says that many offers were made on Fela's back catalog while he was alive, but nothing came of it. As Bovell explains, "Motown came to see him and he refused. They only offered him a million dollars [for his catalog], and he thought 'hey, shit, no, I wipe my ass with a million dollars. That's my toilet paper bill!'"

Fela briefly found his way into international headlines again in 1993 when a dead body was found near his house. He was arrested, charged with murder, but eventually released. It would blur into the latter part of the list of an alleged 356 trips to court in 25 years.

This past April, he again made news with yet another "Indian hemp" bust, but as he did so many times before, he escaped conviction when the charges were dropped in early July, a mere month before his passing. When the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha hung the

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BOB TARTE

In my three-decade-long obsession with music, lots of songs have surprised me but only two have shocked me. One was "Holidays in the Sun," my first dose of the Sex Pistols in 1978. The other was "Sorrow Tears and Blood" in 1981, my first electrifying encounter with Fela. While the Pistols lost their punch in the more extreme music that followed them, Fela's best remains as powerful as ever. "Sorrow" begins with an extended tease before the groove settles down, shifts to raucous knuckles-rather-than-know-how keyboard noodling, then comes the transcendent moment, the choked squawk where Fela's saxophone dashes in and blows everything else away. This amazing entrance would have been enough to sustain most songs, but the tension keeps building until Fela's deceptively calm voice temporarily anchors the chaos, the English-language lyrics telling a chilling story of military brutality up the ante while his backup singers gnash their teeth in despair. Crisp, defiant and always apocalyptic, Fela's music brilliantly described both the failures and possibilities of post-colonial Nigeria. His sound was so unique, so utterly grounded in his colossal personality, that few even bothered to imitate it. So long, Fela.

RON SAKOLSKY

When I found out about Fela's death I couldn't shake a feeling of great loss, I still can't.

On the day he died (unbeknownst to me) I had recorded a birthday tape of his song "Lady" on request for my South African friend Charlie, and I remember my discussion with Charlie about the song. Yes, it could be interpreted as sexist, yet it was also, and powerfully so, an indictment of the colonial mentality of the African woman who emulates European manners and culture at the expense of her own. In the latter sense, it was an affirmative rallying cry for freedom, as so many of his songs were, even if flawed by its dismissal of gender equality as a Western notion. And it was that same song which had inspired the most spirited dancing of the evening by African women at a recent gig that I deejayed.

Of the several times that I saw him perform live, perhaps the most memorable for me was in St. Louis a few years ago. I was there with two female friends. One confronted Fela with her angry stare from the lip of the stage, unleashing such an intense non-verbal response from him that it caused her to faint and she had to be carried outside. As to the other woman, she swears that she conceived a child while engaging in some of the wildest lovemaking

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of her marriage after the concert that evening. Such was the power of the man.

I think of my interview with his son, Femi, for a recent issue of *The Beat*: so strong and proud—solidly in the tradition of his father even when, on occasion, he criticized his music. When *The Beat* asked me to choose a song for their anniversary cd, it was Fela's "Sorrow, Tears, and Blood" that instantly came to mind. I know of very few songs that have such an awe-inspiring ability to embody the voice of an oppressed people.

Fela, I will miss you.

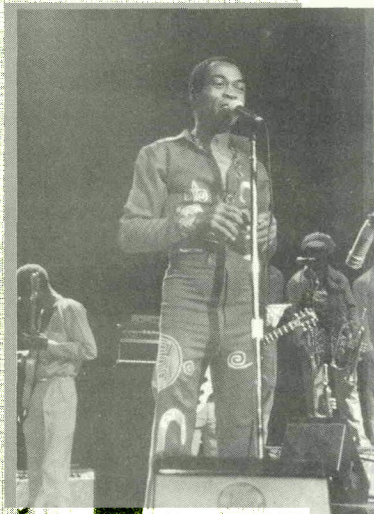


PHOTO BY ADE JAMES

STEVE HEILIG

Sometime in the early 1980s, I was wandering the streets of Amsterdam in a haze when I heard a unique and powerful sound. Horns blaring, drums pounding, a veritable steamroller of rhythm.... "What is that?" I wondered, and found the hall where none other than Fela and his band were holding forth. From then on I was a fan. A few years later, in 1984, he was scheduled to play for the first time in California, but was busted on trumped-up currency charges in Lagos and spent yet more time in jail. More years passed, another tour was scheduled, and this time he made it. I took a few friends who had never heard of him, and we scammed front-row seats in Berkeley. When the full band hit their stride, we were all mesmerized. Three or four songs consumed over two hours, and then it was over. I asked one friend, visiting from Europe, what he thought. "Completely amazing," he said, shaking his head. "But I think that man is

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eloquent writer and outspoken environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and imprisoned Fela's brother Beko Ransome-Kuti in recent years, it was perhaps a chilling sign of the end for Fela. He did not respond in either case. Some argue that he was too ill to fight, yet he clearly was able to muster the energy to elude conviction on the hemp charges. Questions remain unanswered.

Sola Oniyide, a Nigerian member of the Elite Club, an L.A.-based organization involved in charitable activities and now focusing on AIDS awareness in Nigeria since Fela's death, says his generation grew up on Fela's music. "He used his music to address a lot of problems within our society. Fela was a very complex man. He was a visionary. He really believed in his cause. He never gave up. If all we Nigerians can learn something from him, [it's] for us to be able to speak to our beliefs and live our beliefs. He

taught us that we have to speak up."

Jamaican reggae singer and pan-Africanist Burning Spear toured with Fela in Africa in the late '80s. "I think Fela is a strong African singer, and I think the masses in Africa [are] into what Fela do," says Spear. "For Fela hitting some strong point and some logical point wherein no one else would hit. His message was very strong within the music. If he wasn't important, they wouldn't try to break him down. When you try to do the right thing you will get a big fight. If you let the wrong things interfere, you going down."

"From what I observe, Fela is a person who stands up for people in Africa, throughout the world, 'cause his music go beyond. Is not limited," observes former Black Uhuru frontman Michael Rose, with whom Fela recorded in 1986. "When you listen to Fela, you know that his music on a level and it's brilliant."

Brian Eno, often considered one of Western music's most articulate musicians, producers and musicologists, referred to Fela often in



PHOTO BY SEGUN OYEKUNLE

interviews dating back to the '70s, placing him in a class by himself. "In 1972, I first heard a Fela record," Eno said in 1988. "I'd heard James Brown and understood what that was about. Then I heard Fela, and he was an African who listened to James Brown. And he'd taken what James was doing, but really extrapolated it in a big way. The early '70s recordings were the best I think."

In 1995, Eno told the BBC, "I listen to [Fela] over and over and over again. I have more albums by him than by any other single artist. . . I listen particularly to the way the bass is used; that's what really interests me about these records. The use of the bass as an instrument that is both percussive and melodic at the same time."

Adjectives such as "unequaled" and "original" seem entirely appropriate in describing the life of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. You can search and run the lists of comparisons to try to find another story like his, but then how many communes have there been on the face of the Earth, within the iron clasp of a military dictatorship? How could an island of egalitarianism under its own rule of law have existed in a state that had its way with any of its other subjects? How did it flourish for so long, led by a musician whose cultural, political and spiritual magnetism drew together the resources to make it possible? How could it have been revived after brutal attempts to destroy it? If it was a unique circumstance, then it was a unique individual who made it possible.

Ayuko Babu, executive director of the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, says there is no other individual in Fela's league and emphasizes the complexity of the artist's motives. "Fela was viewed as a cultural, political and musical leader in the black world. He was really a pan-Africanist. Nigeria was his particular platform, [but] all the questions he raised in Nigeria, he felt these were issues that had to be faced in Africa and throughout the black world as well as the diaspora. He reflected what everybody felt and everybody thought."

As to pan-Africanism, Fela often espoused its tenets. "That is the only way the Africans can benefit from their environment," he said in 1986. "The way Africa is cut up now and the way the individual African governments behave in Africa is negative to progress. This is why we see the unified Africa as the ultimate. Because Africa is not unified, that is why South Africa can operate [in apartheid]."

Babu says that what the Western world thought of as "outrageous" behavior was always a calculated political statement by Fela. "The marriage was a political act," he explains, as a response to the accusation that Fela was corrupting young unmarried girls. "[Now] you can't say they're not married."

When Fela later divorced his wives, he explained that he did "not believe any more in the marriage institution. The marriage institution for the progress of the mind is evil. I learned that from prison. Why do people marry? Is it to be together? Is it to have

children? People marry because they are jealous. People marry because they are possessive. People marry because they are selfish. All this comes to the very ugly fact that people want to own and control other people's bodies. I think the mind of human beings should develop to the point where that jealous feelings should be completely eradicated."

Babu explains that on the question of "Do we follow ourselves and our traditions or do we follow the European tradition?, Fela squarely was on the side of 'follow ourselves.' Black folks have been smoking ganja for 7,000 years in Africa," Babu explains. "It is a traditional herb that we use to alter our state of consciousness. There is no place on the continent where it is not smoked traditionally. [Fela's] position was that the attack on marijuana was racial and Eurocentric."

Fela himself felt that his views were often marginalized and trivialized. "During the political struggles I had so many names attached to my personality like 'hooligan,' 'hemp smoker,' 'wearing briefs,' 'half-naked.' All this shit, they gave me all kind of bullshit names. That kind of myth went on so long that it confuse so many people. After the prison, the whole country realized my point much [more] clearly. It's finally to the point where the honesty of my struggles became very exposed, clear. That vindicated all my views."

"He's got a very unique place in history," says Shanachie's Randall Grass, whose company has released four cds of Fela's work. "There are very few African artists who are as overtly political as he was. He created a style of music that is completely unique and that virtually nobody else has successfully performed and recorded on an ongoing basis. To a large degree it was an extension of his own persona—musically, psychically and lyrically. It sprang out of the whole experience of Fela at the Shrine in Lagos."

Grass, who visited The Shrine in 1976, recalls an utterly unique experience. "It was incredible. It was packed with people. It reminded me of the communal rock vibe in the '60s. It was more than just a musical show. It was genuinely an alternative scene. You had this open-air club with a couple of levels to it. Hemp smoke was thick in the air—flags from all the African nations ringing the courtyard. You had the stage with Africa 70, which was just a pretty awesome spectacle. It would just go on for hours, generally until dawn. There were raised platforms with young women gyrating, almost like go-go platforms. There was a real sense of rapport between Fela and the people in the audience."

Before the performance there would be a ceremony, a libation to the ancestors and sort of a consecration. That's why he called it The Shrine. He would come out with a cigarette or a spliff in his hand and stroll around and talk for 20 or 30 minutes about

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crazy." Maybe so, I thought, but if so, it's the kind of crazy that sometimes seems a little less insane than the rest of the world. And with music that powerful and unique, we could all use a little more such madness.

LENI SINCLAIR

I am glad that I went to see Fela every chance I had. I even drove to Chicago from Detroit once to see him at the Equator Club, where he played all night for an almost-all-Nigerian crowd. And I am so glad I did, because otherwise I might never have known just how great the man was. That night I got a glimpse of what it might feel like to be at the Shrine in Lagos on a hot and sweaty night, drinking beer and dancing the night away to Fela's kickin' band till the sun comes up. It's hard to believe that he's gone so suddenly.

ANDREW C. FRANKEL

I have always been amazed by the incredible impact that Fela had on peoples' lives around the world. People I have known on three continents who have nothing in common, all remained in awe of this man and his music. I must admit that I am one of the awestruck.

What really made him amazing was his commitment. Fela was totally committed to being Fela... a brilliant, frustrating, determined, stubborn, outspoken, loudmouthed, unique man. Not only was he not afraid to fly in the face of society, he seemed compelled to fly in the face of everything. There were the big rebellions—like declaring his compound an independent republic in a country under military rule—yet even more astounding were the small daily rebellions, making a public show of his sexuality and even bodily functions, breaking all social mores and customs.

Fela's antics were numerous and outrageous beyond description. Yet all the while he continued to pump out some of the most incredible and moving music ever to be heard on the planet. Of the more than 140 records Fela recorded in his career, just a few have trickled out to the West. I hope more of his many Nigerian classics will find the light of day someday.

I was fortunate to have met Fela and spent several evenings in his Africa Shrine in Lagos. Theoretically a nightclub, it was more like a universe unto itself. At the doors of the Shrine, the law of the land stopped and the anything-goes atmosphere of Fela's universe prevailed.

Although I didn't always like him, I always worshipped him. Fela was, to me, living proof that with determination, truly anything was possible. Many people were sure that one day the government would kill Fela. It is noteworthy to remember that sad as his death is, it was on his own terms and in his own place. It is hard to imagine who we will find now to speak out against everything, but I am sure there will never be another Fela. May his soul rest in peace, and his followers find their way. He will be missed.

ADEWALE AKINNUOYE-AGBAJE

I was asked to write this testament while it was still "hot on my mind." Fela Anikulapo Kuti is forever, eternally "hot on my mind," he's pepper in my blood, he's burnt in my soul, stamped on me like the stamp they put on my t-shirt the first night I visited the Shrine.

What he gave me none can take. He wrenched my soul from my guts, spat it on the floor before, and said, "Everybody say yeah yeah!" From my mother's womb came my body. From Fela came my soul. His music is my true mother and father. He walked and talked with surreal knowing. He didn't sing, he cried, he poured his soul over a wondrous musical lyrical labyrinth. It was a journey. He took me beyond the despair his tongue spoke of, he catapulted me to heights without skies. I was flying for the flight. "Egbe-mi-o!" he teased me, stretched me, twisted me, wounded me, beat me, contorted me, and then compounded me with more.

When first I tasted this magical conspiracy of truth, wisdom, pain wrapped in raw eloquence, I knew I belonged to a world. He was the growl from the guts of the lion and the shit from the bowels of the beggar, the champion of my soul, heaven's puppet, an orchestrator of jubilation. And you, you foolish runaways, running to nowhere, you better cry now you have no shepherd to whip your ass back to the pen. You better cry and hope that there's a god that's forgiving. You've destroyed his only Son of Africa. You've wounded this universe, to let such a force live and die so. He tried to cure you of your betrayal (Yellow Fever); he tried to cure you of your brutality (B.O.N.N.); he tried to cure you of your own stupidity and ignorance (Suffering and Smiling/Zombie/UpSide Down); he tried to release you from your constrictions and show you your own beauty (No Be Gentleman/Lady/FeFe Naa Effe/Open and Close/Shakara).

He massaged the earth of its wounds with the notes of his keyboards and screams from his horns. And you could only beat him, talk bad on him. Enslave him, enslave him, engrave him with your torture. You abused him so, you hurt him so, a beautiful man with love, passion and a ferocity for truth. You abused him until he cried, "Egbe-mi-o!" (carry me). Now the Lord has heard this "Black Man's Cry." I say nah-wah for you Africa, hear his music and find yourself. Because the only Africa that exists is in his music. I know through him that there is a true Africa that awaits me.

I will take my refuge in the Shrine: where 90-year-old ladies shuffle with their pipes and beggars without limbs flip like fish beneath their feet, and children, chickens, dogs, cats, naked girls, obese men, people white yellow pink blue all sway to one pure rhythm. That's my Africa! That's my Shrine, my funky African arcs where we see people for themselves, our souls joined



PHOTO BY REGINA OVERKULE

FELA KUTI: AFRICAN ORIGINAL

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whatever was going on at that time—the latest police attack or something the government was doing, anything that was on his mind. Then a small boy would run up with his saxophone, and he would play a solo and then someone else would solo. Then Fela would go over to the keyboards and play there for a while. Then he would take the mike and go into the main melody of the song with a lot of call and response. A typical song would be like 45 minutes or an hour."

"He was very important to many people," says Sandra Isadore. "Right now, I think about those people that he left behind—those in the compound that he gave employment to. Those that he took in off the streets. Those that would not have had a place to stay or a job or a future had it not been for Fela. Fela was a very generous man. This is the man that I know. He gave opportunities to many. At the same time, he was like a common man. He was very simple. He didn't need a lot of flair. I know it sounds strange, but... when he came [to America], I said 'Fela, you're a star, I should hire a limousine.' He said 'No. Can all my band members go in the limo?' If everybody couldn't go in the limousine, then he couldn't have it. He would not be separated. He didn't put himself above any of them or anyone."

Fela's enormous appetite for life was both an essential part of his genius and a direct contributor to his decline. His last political statement was made by ironic counter-example. He died of AIDS as a result of his promiscuity. For Africa, the death of a figure with the stature of Fela may change minds about the reality of the AIDS problem. "Even in death, Fela has raised the question [of AIDS]," notes Ayuko Babu. "The leadership [in Africa] has not come to grips with AIDS. Had Fela known how sick he was, he would have spoken out."

Fela's view of death and fear itself were among his defining characteristics. He told biographer Carlos Moore in *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*: "Death doesn't worry me, man.

When my mother died it was because she finished her time on earth. I know that when I die I'll see her again, so how can I fear death? ... So what is this motherfucking world about? ... I believe there is a plan ... I believe there is no accident in our lives. What I am experiencing today completely vindicates the African religions ... I will do my part ... then I'll just go, man. Just go!"

While Fela's rejection of Western medicine and safe-sex practices clearly hastened his death in the end, his Africentric approach to life allowed him to live to the fullest in the overall sense. He lived more life in 58 years than most could in 116. "Fela will make no apologies for nothing," says Sandra. "He lived his life his way, the way he wanted to live it. It can definitely be said he had a full life. He twisted his shoes his way; nobody told him what to do. I fought with him on many occasions. It was not easy dealing with Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. From the very beginning it was a fight, but it was fun. It's the end of an era for me."

When a person of far-reaching impact passes from the Earth, it is tempting to bring out the superlatives, grand statements and conjecture in an attempt to be convincing. Time will determine the real legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. As it has been, Fela's will likely continue to be an underground story outside the blues African world. Perhaps his back catalog will see the light of day and his music will be widely available for the world's inspection and appreciation.

It is equally possible that his legacy will pass into further obscurity as his catalog becomes increasingly out of print. Perhaps Fela will take on the dimensions of blues singer Robert Johnson, another griot who lived life in his own way; was at times loved and at times loathed, but among those who truly knew his art, was undeniably revered as its most important player. To whatever history Fela Anikulapo-Kuti will ultimately belong, for those who touched him—either personally or through the intangibly intimate contact of his greatest recordings, he will never be forgotten.

A special thanks to Sandra Isadore for turning Fela on to the world.

Further reading:

Fela: This Bitch of A Life by Carlos Moore (Allison & Busby, London, 1982)

The Beat, December 1984

"My Life in Prison by Fela Anikulapo Kuti," *Newsweek* (Nigeria), May 12, 1986

"Free at Last" by Roger Steffens, *Option*, October 1986

"Last Days of Fela?" by Ademola Adedoyin, *The Week* (Nigeria), Aug. 4, 1997

by Fela's music, drinking, stiffs (marijuana) to raise us ever higher from this shambles we call an Africa.

I thank you Fela Anikulapo Kuti in tears and in ink for the world you let me see. I will not stop until I reach—I salute you with my fists, you are my food, my fuel, my force. To all of you who think he's for "fashion and profit" beware we salute with our fists. Now that the flesh has gone Africa you can still redeem yourself. Devour the spirit, drench yourself in his music, drink every last drop because you abused him, you abused Bob, it's only Mandela and the music. Hear them well!

Don't let them die in vain. Get up stand up for your rights. Hear them well.

ROGER STEFFENS

My strongest memories of Fela are from the time he spent in L.A. following his release from prison. We did a video interview with him in which he wore

nothing but his traditional purple bikini underpants. Near-disaster ensued when I asked if he would play something and as he stood, the camera had to pan up very quickly to avoid F.F.N., which (Fela-like) stands for full frontal nudity. Next, I suggested that his return from prison must have been very satisfying, especially in regards to renewing his relationships with his 27 wives. "Oh, no, when I got out of the prison, I divorced them all." "Why?" I asked in shock. "Oh," said Fela, shaking his head, "marriage is too confining."

And who can ever forget the tumultuous reception he received in his Egypt 80 debut in the (somehow appropriate) gladiatorially hellish, bloodied cement-block confines of the Olympic Boxing Auditorium? After a warmup number from the band, out Fela came, carried aloft on a plank by a bevy of scantily clad African queens, a very un-PC thing to do in dem times. The crowd loved it. During a break, I went out to the backstage parking lot, where I couldn't help but notice a perfectly preserved four-door pink 1959 Cadillac Eldorado, its fins sparkling silver in the moonlight, the perfect pimpmobile. There was a blonde man with ducktail and peg pants doing his Ed "Kookie" Burns number on the fender. "Is this your car?" I asked. "Naw, man. The promoter just rented it. It's for Fela to get around town in."

When God made brave Fela, the mold was broken, and we shall never again see his like.

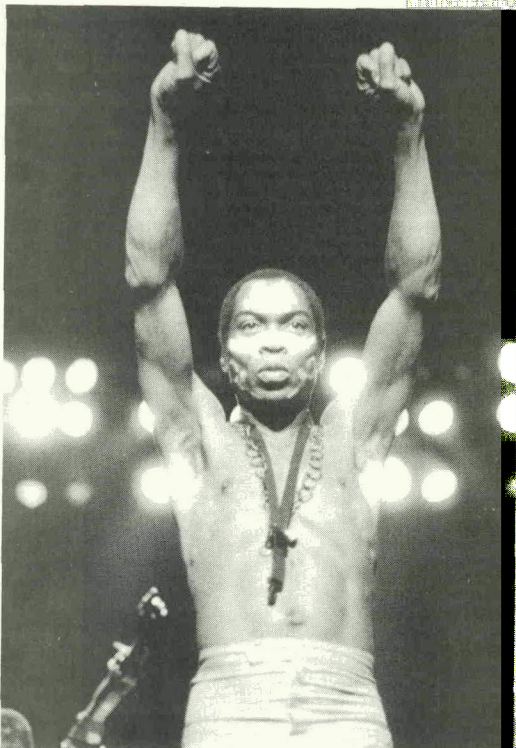


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