

And **T**HE passing of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti after three decades of innovative political music-making affords us an opportunity to try and understand the unique and unprecedented way he used his popular art as a vehicle for both cultural awareness and revolutionary consciousness, and the dramatic contours of his story allow us to draw a variety of conclusions about its ultimate significance.

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Fela's mixture of abuse, profanity, and social deviance was already a hard package for many Nigerians to swallow even during the height of his popularity in the mid-1970s and it might be argued that after 1977, when he largely abandoned his socio-comic critiques for explicit political diatribes, he effectively consigned his music to an enforced sub-cultural location, ultimately conforming to the social marginality accorded most sub-Saharan African musicians who either assumed, or are charged with, the ambivalently-accepted responsibility of social criticism. Overall, however, one point is clear - in the midst of recent political turmoil in Africa (Nigeria, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Zaire), as well as a new cycle of neo-African culturalism throughout the African diaspora, Fela's music holds a renewed relevance for Nigeria and the entire continent, and

his journey is a potent metaphor for the history of post-colonial Africa and of pan-Africanism.

As a **post-colonial African creative artist**, Fela's work conforms closely to Frederic Jameson's interpretation of the 'third-world artwork' as metaphor for the emergent nation-state.¹ Criticised as oversimplistic, reductive, and ultimately ethnocentric in its inability to engage the aesthetic dimensions of non-Western literature,² Jameson's idea is applicable to Fela's work for the simple reason that the latter has consciously and explicitly used his art to address the condition of post-colonial Africa.

The successive stages of Fela's work also conform remarkably closely to Frantz Fanon's 'three stages of the native intellectual' idea advanced in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a conformity which

demonstrates Fela's roots in the struggles and symbols of the nationalist period.³ In Fanon's evolutionary scheme, the work of the native intellectual is marked in its first phase by a strong identification with the worldview of the colonial master, usually following a period of education in the colonial centre. The work of the second phase is marked by a reactionary tone in which the intellectual uncritically celebrates his native society, reflexively rejecting anything associated with the colonising culture. Finally, in the third phase, the native intellectual outgrows the romanticisation of the previous phase, sharpening his critical apparatus and



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directing it towards his native society.

Making allowances for minor discrepancies and periods of overlap, Fela's work broadly conforms to this scheme. The first is typified by his early career, in which he attempted to make a name for himself working self-consciously in the high-modernist modes of African-American jazz music, with which he became familiar during his student years in Britain. The second phase followed his politicisation in America, and is marked by his full embrace of popular music as a valid medium, and songs, such as *Buy Africa* or *Black Man's Cry*, which celebrate the African nation and the black aesthetic. The third phase began after his 1974 imprisonment and especially following the 1977 Kalakuta attack, and is reflected in works such as *Alagbon Close*, *International Thief Thief*, and *Overtake Don Overtake Overtake*, which take a harshly critical look at the problems confronting contemporary Africa.

Substituting a different 'lens of analysis offered by Edward Said (in *Orientalism*), the period from 1958 (when he entered music school in England) through 1974 (the year of the first police raid on his home) might be thought of as Fela's *nationalist* period, during which his work tended to be concerned with issues of nation-building, modernist ideas of the art work as assisting the nation-state project, and repairing the psychological damage of the colonial encounter. Fela's work since 1974 is best thought of as *liberationist* in tone: it is ultimately concerned not with issues of national independence and solidarity, but

with using a timeless vision of African utopia (simultaneously pre-modern and post-revolutionary) to critique the problems of the post-colonial nation-state and function as a voice for its dispossessed. As time has passed, in fact, Fela was increasingly loathe to identify himself as a 'Nigerian', preferring to be known as an African, and in this he was clearly contesting the idea of the nation-state - reflecting at once his embrace of the pan-African ideal and the subversive dimensions of his 'Afrotopian' vision, while demonstrating what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called the failure of the nation-state model to speak to or change the condition of the underclass (*subaltern*).⁴

Class and Education as Catalysts for Political Art

Issues of class must be considered in order to understand the ideological underpinning of Fela's social mission, his symbolic deconstruction of his elite status, his deviation from the traditional social function of the African creative artist, and the varying reception of his message by different sectors of Nigerian society. Much of this can be directly traced to two sources: his family heritage, which exposed him to his father's staunch anti-colonial stance and his mother's African articulation of socialist ideals, his childhood in colonial Abeokuta, in which Western education and native cultural consciousness fused to create a hotbed of regional, sub-ethnic political activism; and the cosmopolitan perspective Fela developed during his formative periods abroad, in Europe and the United States. It was his proximity to these experiences which set him apart from other African musicians, most of whom have tended to be less radical in their social vision for two reasons: their artistic visions tend to be deeply rooted in traditional culture, and their creations continue to be heavily patronised by national elites.

Music has thus generally not been a vehicle for social criticism, and politically-active African artists tend to have had some advanced education or significant experience abroad, often working in mediums considered to have had their genesis during the colonial era such as film or literature.⁵ As such, Fela was more similar in many ways to writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiong' O and Wole Soyinka, or

filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene, in his self-conscious use of art as a tool for social criticism, education, and political empowerment. In fact, Fela shared much with Sembene in his loose application of Marxist ideas of class struggle, his liberationist approach, and his 'neo-griot' goal of using his art to account for the history of the

masses. I am thinking especially of Sembene's critique of the Senegalese elite in his 1974 film *Xala*, and it is no coincidence that it was produced during the same period that Fela offered *Colonial Mentality*, *Mr Grammatology-lisation-alism Is the Boss*, and *Johnny Just Drop*, covering an identical range of topics. The work of both men critiqued African post-coloniality during a period in which the condition had become relatively well-defined, and their experiences abroad enabled them to view their cultures against the backdrop of planetary culture.

Elements of a Pan-African Vision

A loose distinction can be made between what is *African* and what is *black* in Fela's work. The afrobeat style is fundamentally *African* in its oppositional political alignment, privileging the interests of dispossessed African masses over those of neo-colonial Western governments, multinational corporations, or indigenous elites. It is fundamentally *African* in the traditional rhetorical modes by which most of Fela's song lyrics are structured, as well as in the communal social setting in which it operated. It is also fundamentally *African* in its musical construction, as Fela drew extensively upon traditional African musical styles as a source of compositional and conceptual inspiration although it has not always been clear exactly which African musical traditions he has drawn upon. But the potent, pro-African combination of these political, cultural, and musical elements may explain the reason Fela was consistently awarded top annual honours in the Nigerian Musician Union's (PMAN) incredibly vague 'African Music' category, even though all the categories are ostensibly concerned with music produced in Africa by African musicians; the honour acknowledges the musical sound, political commitment, and cultural resonance of Fela's afrobeat.

It is important to note that the African elements in afrobeat have been fashioned within an ongoing dynamic of cross-cultural interaction between Africa and its diaspora which influenced the articulation of their 'Africanity.' Instrumentally, Fela's extensive use of techniques like modalism, ensemble stratification, and hocketing all clearly had their roots in traditional West

African music, while their presence owed equally to their articulations in the music of African-American musicians such as John Coltrane and James Brown. Ultimately, these influences were refashioned in a way which accented their fundamental African character and Fela's compositional rigour enabled him to consciously arrange a number of pan-African musical devices to evoke a mood which was thoroughly African. In terms of the rhetoric infusing his music, Fela's style reflected the influence of what Gilroy has described as a 'metaphysics of 'blackness' largely developed in the African diaspora (especially Afro-America), and characterised by a foreground of contentious gender dynamics, radical excavations/reformations of black history, a confrontational approach to political activism, an emphasis on 'blackness' as a signifier for (pan) African identity, and an existential proximity to, and ritualised re-enactment of historical terror (both personal and collective). His style of derisive criticism was based as much in the political rhetoric and vernacular traditions of Afro-America as in indigenous West African traditions of derisive humour. Thus, his work was fundamentally *black* in its elegant fusion of pan-African modes of identity, expression, protest, and musical style.

Finally, we should identify that strain of Fela's work which might be called particularly Yoruba in nature. First in the fact that, despite his insistence on pan-African culture, most of the cultural symbols which enliven his work are specifically Yoruba in origin. There were exceptions to this in his work of the 1970s, into which he integrated Ashanti aphorisms ('Fefe Na Efe') or pan-anglophone West African slang ('Shenshema') into his songs. But for the most part,

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when Fela chanted the names of mythical African figures such as 'Oranyan,' 'Orompoto,' or 'Orunmila' in his songs, he drew not on the symbols of the entire continent, but those of his native Yoruba culture. And it is somehow difficult to image Fela fashioning his own parallel universe in Nigerian cities such as Kano, Abuja or Onitsha as completely as he did in Yoruba-dominated Lagos.

On a more philosophical level, Fela plumbed the depths of Nigerian society to fashion a contemporary tragic vision

within a musical mood of pervasive pathos, in the process conforming deeply to mythopoetic tendencies in traditional Yoruba oral literature. Wole Soyinka, in his essay *The Fourth Stage*, defined tragedy in traditional Yoruba myths as '...the anguish of (cosmic) severance, the fragmentation of essence from self,' and Fela's project of cultural revitalisation certainly aspired to a reintegration of the African psyche with its cultural and cosmic essences. Karin Barber, discussing Ghanaian highlife songs, has noted a prevalent mood of pathos in highlife lyrics, seeing them as ultimately reflecting '...all the ills characteristic of a society undergoing rapid urbanisation.' Even if Barber's observation does not directly concern Yoruba culture, the most intractable worldly problems are often articulated in terms of the cosmic, and Fela's articulation of worldly problems - even when not metaphorised in mystical terms - was often deeply infused with the mood of traditional Yoruba oral literature. With what Gabriel Gbadamosi has called 'the ghoulish dynamism of Nigeria,' he explored his country's 'traumatic self-image forming out of the collision of disparate influences' with his sarcastic, trenchant imagery of political infighting (*Noise For Vendor Mouth*), civil confusion ('*Confusion*'), aimlessness ('*Perambulator*'), deprivation ('*Original Sufferhead*'), indignity ('*Power Show*'), culture alienation ('*Gentleman*'), military domination ('*Overtake Don Overtake Overtake*') and decay ('*Confusion Break Bone*') - immeasurably reinforced by the mocking and heavily-traditional tone of his chorus singers. Fela's embrace of tragedy was not resigned or hopeless; rather, it reflected a characteristically Yoruba philosophy of tragedy (often conceived of as a traditional state essential to cosmic and social realignment) as well as a more worldly sense of ultimate revolutionary triumph.¹²

Fela's Musical Legacy

It is the potent combination of these elements which qualified Fela as an authentic, organic folk hero, and over thirty years he established a body of work that was simultaneously progressive, innovative, and subversive. In light of recent events, it is clear that Fela continued to be a highly-charged cultural/political symbol in Nigeria until his death. Over three decades, he refined his musical language and his music also cleared - if only temporarily - a space for not only popular political dissent and mobilisation, but also a type of counter-cultural expression extremely rare in West African societies. At the same

time, his pan-African odyssey points to future possibilities of both political engagement for musicians and innovative formulation of neo-African identity.

One of the most overlooked aspects of Fela's oeuvre is the contribution it has made, the work of other African composers notwithstanding, to the development of a uniquely-(pan) African tradition of 'serious' composition. Although his music operates strictly within the sphere of popular music and he has been fairly dismissive of more consciously-Western African composers, his work contains deep structural insights into the fusion of African and Western musical traditions and materials. The distinction between Fela and these composers is on what Samuel Floyd has called the level of music's 'mythical' content. Despite the Western training he shared with many of them, Fela substituted the myths of African art - the myth of art as communal enterprise, the myth of art as maintenance for social-equilibrium - in place of the Western myth of the concert hall, or of the artistic as separate, other-worldly sphere. But ultimately, selective aspects of his work will likely facilitate the continued development of African art music.

It remains to be seen whether younger practitioners will emerge and adapt the afrobeat style to subsequent generations, or whether it was a brief historical episode fuelled by a charismatic individual and a particular set of economic, social, and political circumstances. Based as much in African-American as African culture, Fela's work will probably receive a full revisionist reappraisal at a time when political and cultural developments stimulate a resurgence of pan-

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African cultural sentiments similar to the period in which he originally developed his style. On the musical front, the music of the 1970s has for the past several years experienced a major comeback as digital fodder for sampling, studio-based musicians on both sides of the Atlantic (i.e. those practising in *hip-hop*, *jungle*, *house*, *acid-jazz*, or similar styles), as well as through retro tastes which seek the music out in its original form. The acid-jazz style, in particular, has stimulated a revival of the brand of 1960s/1970s fusion music which

coupled jazz-based arrangements with funk rhythms, performed by groups such as *Earth, Wind, & Fire* and *Kool & the Gang*.

A survey of artists directly or indirectly drawing on Fela's work demonstrates the influence of his music around the world. It has been praised and acknowledged by some of the most influential musicians of recent decades such as Stevie Wonder, David Byrne, Jaco Pastorius, Afrika Bambaataa, Brian Eno, and Paul McCartney. In his 1989 autobiography, trumpeter Miles Davis - responsible for a number of crucial stylistic revolutions in modern music - suggested Fela's music as an important reference point for future directions in world music.¹³

Because of the way Fela ran his band and organisation, centred in the main around his personal charisma, it has been difficult for musicians to use a tenure with Afrika 70 or Egypt 80 as an apprenticeship to a greater public profile. In this respect Fela's organisation differed from most other African popular ensembles and talented soloists such as Allen, Y.S. Akinibosu, and others have generally not consolidated the experience into viable leadership roles on their own. Still, a number of musicians have experimented with elements of the afrobeat style. Since leaving Egypt 80 in 1986, Fela's eldest son Femi has emerged as the genre's main exponent, continuing to explore his father's musical direction and socio-political concern on three albums with his own *Positive Force Band*. Rejecting his father's image as a social rebel while continuing the legacy of political music, Femi has cultivated an image as a clean-living, responsible musician, while like Ziggy Marley, working largely within the musical and rhetorical models established by his father.

Other African artists referencing afrobeat have generally taken instrumental elements and divorced them from Fela's political content. Most visibly, a number of juju musicians have integrated elements of afrobeat into their repertoire, and today it is rare that a well-known juju group does not include segments of minor-key afrobeat-derived music in their performances. Best known among these are musicians like Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Dele Abiodun and Segun Adewale. Along with Abiodun (whose *Confrontation* EP contains two lengthy tracks of pure afrobeat), Ade's adoption of afrobeat style is the most direct, while Obey's borrowings tend to be more compatible with traditional juju practice.

Outside of Africa, musicians have referenced afrobeat more symbolically, and the international appeal of Fela's music attests to its cross-cultural pedigree.



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An afrobeat-derived tenor guitar figure propels Bob Marley's *Could You Be Loved?* composed after his brief passage through Nigeria in 1980. The debated influence of afrobeat on James Brown's music seems evident in a number of compositions recorded after the latter's Nigerian trip, most notably on the JB's *Hot Pants Road* (1971). Its particular influence on bassist Bootsy Collins may be detected in Collins' 1980 piece with the group 'Sweat Band', titled *Jamaica*, as well as in his own 1976 song *Stretchin' Out (In A Rubber Band)*, which he claims was inspired by music he heard during his trip to Africa with Brown. Later in the decade, Collins' P-Funk mentor George Clinton would pay homage to Fela in his 1983

song *Nubian Nut*, which incorporates chorus lines from *Mr. Follow Follow*. Fela's afrobeat has also often served as a conceptual bridge for African-Americans investigating the music of Africa. Alfred 'Pee Wee' Ellis, who arranged much of James Brown's most innovative music, waxed favourably on Fela's music in a music magazine 'blindfold test' and went on to contribute wind arrangements for the Malian neo-traditional vocalist Oumou Sangare on her *'Worotan'* cd.¹⁵ Soul-jazz vibraphonist Roy Ayers toured Nigeria and recorded with Fela in 1980, and has made a number of guest appearances with Egypt 80 in the United States.¹⁶ Some of his 1980s performances contained derivations of Fela's music; one video shows him influenced by Fela's stage manner, while his band plays an instrumental version of *International Thief Thief* underneath.¹⁷ The Art Ensemble of Chicago, featuring Fela's friend and guest trumpeter Lester Bowie, recorded a version of *Zombie* on their 1987 release *Ancient to the Future*, and Bowie has sat in with Egypt 80 in the United States as a guest soloist. In a similar musical vein, the eclectic fusion group Hotel X included an instrumental version of *Black Man's Cry* on their 1995 recording *Ladders*, while saxophonist Branford Marsalis' collaborative, hip-hop project *Buckshot Le Fonque* (1994) includes samples of Fela's *Beasts of No Nation*.

In terms of political art in Africa, a few musicians have occasionally offered political content in their work, and experienced varying degrees of reprisal. Zimbabwean singer/guitarist Thomas Mapfumo, whose music was a crucial political factor in the months leading to Zimbabwe's 1980 independence, was imprisoned for three months during the Rhodesian government's attempts to censor his popular anti-government songs. Singer Miriam Makeba had her South African citizenship revoked, and received constant death threats as a result of her expatriate career singing and campaigning against apartheid. In Zaire, bandleader Franco and his entire 40-piece band spent two months in prison in 1979 after releasing a series of ostensibly obscene songs which followed an earlier series containing thinly-veiled barbs at government officials and policies.¹⁸ And Fela's countryman Majek Fashek has chosen to sing his political music in exile, from a base in the United States.

While these artists have suffered various repercussions for their occasional forays into political content, none have suffered nearly as much for their opinions as did Fela. Nor have any of them devoted an entire genre or career to political art, or attempted direct involvement in their country's political process. Fela's afrobeat was the only genre exclusively devoted to abusive humour, explicit political criticism, and critical exploration of the African post-colonial and neo-colonial condition. Even on the purely instrumental level, the inherently optimistic, cooperative quality which characterises much African music (especially many of the pleasures offered via the 'world music' production aesthetic) begs the question - can this music ever be a vehicle for explicit political dissent?¹⁹ Post-World War II Western art music, free-jazz in America of the 1960s, punk-rock in England of the 1970s, rap music, and the 'noise' rock bands of the 1980s, and 1990s, all communicate an undeniable spirit of resistance and alienation resulting from concrete political circumstances. Until an African artist produces a sonic assault on the order of punk, Coltrane's *Ascension*, Jimi Hendrix's rendering of the *Star-Spangled Banner* or Penderecki's *Threnody*, Fela's music - with its blaring horns and free-jazz interludes - may be the closest West African music gets to a pure sonic representation of dissent.

This body of work is increasingly relevant in light of contemporary political and cultural developments in Africa and the diaspora. The idea of trans-national alliance in Africa, considered outmoded and unrealistic during the 1970s and 1980s, has regained currency in light of the European Economic Community, and could hold relevance for African nation-states in increasingly dire political and economic straits.²⁰ At the same time, Africa has re-emerged in African-America as a symbol of cultural affirmation and distinction during a period of increasing social conservatism and ethnic polarisation. In such an historical moment, Fela's story could offer perspective on both race and class, on both sides of the Atlantic. Similar to Bob Marley when

he sang (invoking the diasporic legacy of Garveyite pan-Africanism) in *Africa Unite* that the political liberation of diasporic Africans is dependent on unity in Africa, Fela - as much as he drew on the same Egyptian-inspired cultural narratives which fuel afrocentrism - forces the Afrocentrists to understand pan-Africanism in light of the concrete struggles of contemporary Africa, as opposed to the imagined cultural utopia of ancient Nile Valley civilisations. More than anything, this would force them to confront the reality of black-on-black oppression in the 'motherland' as well as the class reality that any 'great' empire, whether it be Dynastic Egypt, colonial Europe, the United States of America, or oil-boom Nigeria, is invariably built upon a solid foundation of human suffering and exploitation. **GR**

Notes

1. See Jameson's essay 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text* #15 (Fall 1986).
2. See Aijaz Ahmad's 1987 responsive essay 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory,"'
3. See pp.222-223.
4. See Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice' from *Wedge*, #7/8, Winter/Spring 1985.
5. See Diawara 1992, especially 'Anglophone African Production', which surveys the roots of the film industry in these countries or chapter 4, 'The Artist As Leader of the Revolution.'
6. I discovered one exception to this during my visit to Nigeria in 1992, when Fela demonstrated the traditional roots of his music by executing an apala dance step to his song *Government Chicken Boy* - a song containing a derived rhythm pattern used frequently by the late apala musician Haruna Isola.
7. For most of these ideas, see Gilroy's essay 'It's A Family Affair: Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship' (1993b). For the ideas of existential terror in diasporic African culture, see his essay 'Not A Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime.' (Gilroy 1993a).
8. The point is also made in Ayu 1985:34. Yoruba legend maintains that *Oranyan* was the seventh son of Oduduwa, progenitor of the Yoruba people; Oranyan also founded and presided over the Oyo Yorubas (Johns 1921:8). It is said that at the end of his life, this king metamorphosed into a granite obelisk (*Opa Oranyan*) which can be found standing today in the city of Ile-Ife. *Orompoto* was a historical king of the Oyo Igboho court founded during a period (the precise years are unclear) in which the seat of Yoruba power was exiled from the ancient capital of Oyo proper (Johnson, p.161-2). *Orumila* is one of the deities said to preside over the Ifa divination system (Idowu 1962:75-80).
9. Soyinka 1976:140-160.
10. Barber 1987:37.
11. Both quotes taken from Gbadamosi's discussion of Wole Soyinka in Gurnah 1993.
12. In his essay 'The Fourth Stage,' Wole Soyinka has discussed this use of tragedy as it exists in the traditional Yoruba dramas related to the *orisa* Ogun (see Soyinka 1976, as well as Gabriel Gbadamosi's essay on Soyinka in Gurnah 1993).
13. Davis 1989: 393.
14. See Collins' comments in the notes to Collins 1994.
15. See Ellis's remarks in Sinkler 1993.
16. The 1980 LP *Music of Many Colours* features Fela and Ayers performing together. Ayers also appeared as a guest soloist in Fela's 1986 and 1991 concerts in New York City.
17. See the video *Fela and Roy Ayers: Africa 79*.
18. See Ewens 1994:166.
19. For a detailed examination of this question, see David Toop's article 'The Meaning of World Music' in *Wire*, January 1997:74.
20. Okey Ndihe's article 'Movement For African Unity' (*West Africa*, 28 August - 3 September 1995) examines the various resurgent currents of pan-African political sentiment.