

Producing Fela's ALBUM JACKET

Ghariokwu
Lemi

MONTHS before the naming of 'Kalakuta Republic', I earned Fela's friendship in 1974 through my acquaintanceship with Babatunde Harrison, then of the *Sunday*

Punch. Very eager to learn and in my last teenage year, I was a man in the making and 'rearing to go'! I frequented the 'republic' and within weeks got assimilated into the main ideological fold. **My credentials were as good as they come: a great Student of Life, a Pan-Africanist (albeit an acolyte) and a 'highly gifted' artist rolled into one.** I passed my first test in flying colours, Babatunde Harrison was the invigilator and Fela, the examiner. **A life-like portrait of the 'Abami' did the magic, and with a stroke of fate my first opportunity to design Fela's album cover came knocking on the door, and as great achievers do, I jumped, swung the door wide open and grabbed Mr. Opportunity with both hands.** For

the next seventeen years, I was to design some twenty three or more thought-provoking album covers for him.

Late in 1974, Fela experienced his first beating and incarceration by the police. This gruesome experience inspired the hit song *Alagbon Close* whose cover was my first hit cover. Having listened ardently to the numerous recounting of the harrowing experience from the man himself and been privy to the various stages of composing the new tune, it was a fait accompli. The album cover was actually a montage of a drawing of Fela I had in my portfolio prior to my chance meeting with 'Tunde Harrison. The said drawing reported the musician to be dancing on a mish-mash of mud and rubbish from my own version of a cover of a previous hit album *Roforofo Fight* of the same year. This was what caught 'Tunde's' attention in my collection whereby he asked if I could design record sleeves at which I answered in the affirmative. *Alagbon Close* album cover was a poster colour painting of a scenario with a rocky background with Fela's 'Kalakuta Republic' standing solidly on the left and a decrepit 'Alagbon Close' jail house with a broken chain half of which is still attached to Fela's left wrist as he dances triumphantly over a capsizing Police patrol boat helped

in effect by a prodigious whale! This cover sent signals to all quarters that a new regime of album covers has begun.

The next two album covers No Bread and Kalakuta Show followed in tow of Fela's vitriolic statements on vinyl. My 'No Bread' was an elaborate oil painting, a melange of social ills plaguing a developing nation fuelled by the then recently introduced Udoji Bursary Awards for public workers - a fallout of the oil-boom. The cover forespoke of the 'doom' to come. 'Mister inflation is in town' was one of the warnings in the painting. This cover took the best of two weeks and a trip to 'cloud nine' to achieve! Fela had insisted I tried a concoction of 'Igbo' (hemp) to 'elevate' my talent. Not wanting to let my great friend down, I tried the herb and the resultant effect was superb. But being a born tetotalter and someone with a mind of my own, I keyed my spirit on the frequency that produced that superb cover without any recourse to the use or abuse of any addictive substance whatsoever and continued with my blossoming career. I thereby simply by meditation had to tune into the right frequency whenever the need arises. 'Kalakuta Show' is also an oil painting on canvas illustrating the arrogant sacking of the 'Republic' in another Fela versus Police drama, the highlight of which is a portrait of Fela's plastered head and the smoking 'Kalakuta Republic' in the background with Fela and aides being brutalised; an escaping 'People's Lawyer' Kanmi Ishola Osobu (Fela's radical lawyer, 'e dey run o, looku lawyer, e dey run o' in the popular song).

Our association and friendship grew in leaps and bounds. I became a regular companion sharing the great ideology of Pan-Africanism and having my mind's eye opened to the great thoughts of no less personages than 'The Redeemer' Kwame Nkrumah, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey etc. I became a travelling companion on some of the trips across the West African coast. I contributed my quota to this great struggle for the emancipation from mental slavery. I found myself in the vantage position of having a pre-knowledge of the logic behind the conception of some of his magnum opuses. With a lot of hardwork and dedication the illustration and design of the album covers thereby became such an easy task.



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Great Fela records followed in succession and so did great Lemi sleeves. Rave reviews locally and internationally joined. Here are two samplers, one from home and the other from abroad. In the *Times Review* page of *Daily Times*, Thursday July 22nd, 1976, Eseoghene Barrett reviews *Ikoyi Blindness* album cover thus: '...The artist is the popular "Lemi" who has done quite a few other works on Fela's albums. The title of the album is *Ikoyi Blindness* and the artist has depicted the affliction of the upper classes in purely graphic terms. The overdressed and puffed-up lawyer is scrambling away from his roots in Mushin, Idioro, Maroko etc. with his eyes thoroughly blindfolded. Behind this frightened central figure, we see the ills of the modern society that he purports to lead, though he cannot, or rather will not see them. The colours used enhance the feeling of brutal neglect by the prolifera-

tion of blood-like red and flesh-like whites, and in the foreground, the brush strokes are deliberately rough and random. This is one of the most striking record covers designed this year.' From *Black Music and Jazz Review*, May 1978, Vol. 1 Issue 2, Page 4. A reader writes in London, ...' Chris May's (The Editor) review of Afrika 70's album "JJD" in the March issue of *Black Music* makes readily interesting reading except for a misconception of the message Fela was putting across in the said album. I disagree with Chris on his conclusion that Fela is directing his sardonic humour at the frequently arrogant critics of Black American visitors to West Africa. Fela's message is very evident

from the piece written at the back of the album by Ghariokwu Lemi (Afrika 70's talented album designer) part of which I quote as follows: "In the hot baking sun, he is the only African man in suite and tie, he is the youngster in faded jeans, he is also in high 'guaranteed' platform shoes. He is the alien in his country - his own motherland!" I believe the attack is on Africans who go abroad only to return home as fully Westernised black men.'

Space will not permit a full treatise on Fela's covers. A future memoir will deal more elaborately with my close encounters with the 'weird one' and the resultant joy I derived from contributing to the struggles of this generation. I remember Fela, as one of my mentors and great inspirators. **GR**

