

Fela Kuti and Maxploitation of Afrobeat Music

By [Franklin Ozekhome](#)

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“I no be gentleman at all o! [Chorus] I be Africa man original



Them call you, make you come chop
You chop small, you say you bellyfull
You say you be gentleman
You go hungry
You go suffer
You go quench
Me I no be gentleman like that

[Chorus]
I no be gentleman at all o!

I be Africa man original” [source: www.lyrics.com]

This is Lagos

“It’s Lagos, Nigeria, the late ‘70s. The hottest musician in Africa is Fela Kuti. His club he calls the shrine. But it’s no ordinary club, and he’s no ordinary musician. He has created a new kind of music, Afrobeat - pounding eclectic rhythms [drawn from music traditions around the globe] mixed with incendiary lyrics to openly attack the corrupt and repressive military dictatorships that rule Nigeria and much of Africa. And now his music is rocking not only Africa, but the world” [source: Playbill].

Enter the world of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, aka Chief Priest Kalakuta Republic, aka Abami Eda, aka Black President. The late Nigerian Afrobeat innovator, human rights activist, political maverick, and his original music art form has being reborn in the

magnetic Fela!, described by critics as a “provocative hybrid of dance and Broadway musical”.

For over eight months, I monitored the off-Broadway production of Fela! and the attendant success that followed as it garnered critical acclaim, hailed by the New York Times as the musical “[that] doesn't so much tell a story as soak an audience to and through the skin with the musical style and sensibility practiced by its leading man.” Sahr Ngaujah of the Afrobeat band Antibalas plays the lead role in the musical while Kevin Mambo acts as an alternate leading man due to the grueling hours involved during each performance.

I wondered if I was ever going to see Fela!, when Antibalas obtained financial backing and support from Shawn ‘Jay-Z’ Carter, Will Smith, Jada Pinkett-Smith, Stephen Semnitz, and Stephen Hendel, and then the musical began its run on Broadway at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre. I proceeded to check out some videos of the musical posted on YouTube. They were enthralling, truly provocative and definitely exciting. Watching the videos finally sealed the deal for me. It had become a top priority on my to-do-list. I had to go watch Fela!

The next weekend, after having dinner at Olive Green, I walked down Times Square towards the Eugene O’Neill Theatre, and spent over 2 hours watching the show. It was simply electric. I sat up on my seat throughout the performance, not wanting to miss a single thing - the flicker of an eye, a suggestive rhythm, or even an evocative beat. Ben Brantley was right. He had stated in the New York Times inter-alia, “This is music that gets into your bloodstream, setting off vibrations you’ll live with for days to come.” Oh, how right he was!

The theatre had been reconstructed as Afrika Shrine, the nightclub Fela had set up in the Empire Hotel in the ‘70s. Flat screens were strategically placed around the theatre, showing recorded videos of Fela and his band, Africa ‘70, and newspaper clips of the musician being arrested and arraigned on flimsy charges brought against him by the military government. The costumes were a perfect throwback to the highlife and disco era; and Antibalas taking on the role of Africa ‘70 was on point. However, the main attraction was the cast. A perfect assemblage by any standards. Each actor carefully handpicked by Tony award winner and director, Bill T. Jones, to play well-rehearsed roles and choreographed scenes.

Mysticism Fuels Love for Afrobeat

“In recent years there has been a revitalization of Fela’s influence on music and popular culture, culminating in a full re-release of his entire catalog, off and on Broadway biopic shows, and new bands, such as Antibalas, carrying the Afrobeat banner to a new generation of listeners” [source: Wikipedia].

I could not help noticing that an eclectic mix of people from diverse backgrounds occupied the entire theatre. Like a typical Naija-man, I had imagined, erroneously, that Africans, African Americans, and Nigerians in particular, would go all out to convert that which they felt was rightfully theirs. Alas, Fela’s music belonged to the world, as depicted by the multi-talented cast members and appreciative audience that came to watch the show. Fela’s music appealed to everyone. From a teenager’s boom box in Kingston, Jamaica, to the colored dance halls of retro nightclubs in Okazaki, Japan, the legend’s music reverberated far and wide.

At times, for inspiration, I listened to Mike Love’s ‘Nigerian Gangster’ remix - a mixtape blend of Jay-Z’s ‘American Gangster’ album interpolated with samples from Fela’s extensive music catalogue. Many a time, I had wondered why I was so drawn to this music. Then, it occurred to me. It was the exotic blend of instruments playing like an orchestra that got me intoxicated - the fusion of jazz, funk, psychedelic rock, and traditional West Africa chants and rhythms. Combined with the base rhythms, shekere, muted and base guitars, Afrobeat music evoked a sort of mysticism around its origin and enthralled anyone who listened to it. That was Fela’s magic. The voodoo he weaved around his audience, captured their attention, got them psyched and obliged to marinate themselves in the juices of his yarns. A true artist indeed.

The mystic was again felt during Fela!, when ‘Dance of the Orishas’ was enacted. “Orisha [spelled Orisa] is a spirit or deity that reflects one of the manifestations of Olodumare [God] in the Yoruba spiritual or religious system” [source: Wikipedia]. The traditional Yoruba chant, ‘Iba Orisha’, was definitely the highlight of the show as the theatre was now draped in

complete darkness, save for the glow of the spirits' white costumes as they floated around the stage dancing to a cacophony of drums and spiritual hymns.

Maxploitation of Afrobeat Music

The Antibalas has inspired the millennial generation and long-time followers of Afrobeat with their evocative display and rendering of the music form. They have almost single-handedly brought to the attention of a global audience, what the trio of Femi Kuti, Dede Mabiaku and Seun Kuti, and dozens of other Afrobeat music-inspired aficionados have been striving to accomplish in over two decades.

Popularisation and commercialization of Afrobeat

An argument could be put forward though - that neither Seun nor Femi's music were truly of the Afrobeat genre. Perhaps, their kind of music were extensions - hybrids so to speak - of Afro music that they had created. Nevertheless, we cannot be devoid of the fact that both scions of Fela Kuti got their inspiration from Abami Eda. The Chief Priest was not only the arbiter of Afrika Shrine and President/CEO, Kalakuta Republic; he was also the principal of a huge family, and an immense source of inspiration to his children.

For supporters of Afrobeat, the music was given new form and meaning through Femi Kuti. Whilst Femi, Seun and Dede have all gained individual renown and success [Femi is a two-time Grammy Award nominee], their reach has been limited due to little or no album sales, declining record label support and poor management. These artistes make more earnings from live concert shows, stage performances and private gigs.

Fortunately, Bill T. Jones and the Antibalas are now expanding the reach of Afrobeat music, turning their shows into a worldwide phenomenon, and reenergizing our passion and love for the music genre.

They are, of course, aided in no small part by their off-Broadway and Broadway shows, affiliations with superstars and trendsetters like Will Smith and Jay-Z, partnerships with global social networks, entertainment companies, urban lifestyle magazines, television, music and fashion networks, NGOs and human rights organization, YouTube videos, social networking sites and blogs.

Each constituency promoting Fela! within their network.

The Future

Focus Features, in partnership with British director Steve McQueen, and writer Biyi Bandele, are developing a film biography, based on Michael Veal's book *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon*, slated for production this year. Knitting Factory Records is also planning to re-master and reissue Fela Kuti's catalogue - all 45 titles.

While we await the film's release and new disc compilations, allow me to indulge you with classic music from Fela's "Lady".

If you call am woman
African woman no go 'gree
She go say, she go say, "I be Lady o"

[Chorus]

She go say, "I be Lady o"!

She go say, "I be Lady"
She go say, "I no be woman"
She go say, "Market woman na woman"

She go say, "I be Lady"

I wan tell you about Lady [x 4]

She go say him equal to man
She go say him get power like man
She go say anything man do himself fit do

I never tell you finish [x 4]

She go wan take cigar before anybody
She go wan make you open door for am
She go wan make man wash plate for am for kitchen

She wan salute man she go sit down for chair [x 2]
She wan sit down for table before anybody [x 2]
She wan a piece of meat before anybody [x 2]

Call am for dance, she go dance Lady dance [x 2]
African woman go dance, she go dance the fire dance [x2]

She know him man na master
She go cook for am
She go do anything he say
But Lady no be so [x 4]

Lady na master [x 3] [source: www.lyrics.com]

Fela! Musical

ABOUT FRANKLIN OZEKHOME

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