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Fela Anikulapo-Kuti

by Monica Berger, NYC College of Technology, CUNY

One of Africa's most popular musicians and famous dissidents, Nigerian Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938 - 1997) was larger than life and rebellious to the core. His influence in popular culture of the United States and Europe has increased in recent years due to fascination with his heroic persona. Fela, who was best known by his first name, reflects the circularity of influence within the African diaspora: how a musician from Lagos absorbed American funk and the Black Power movement and synthesized these elements into afrobeat, which in turn influenced Western musicians. The cross-cultural essence of afrobeat appeals to contemporary audiences accustomed to music that mixes different styles.

Fela's family was solidly Christian and middle-class. While Fela attended the Trinity College of Music in London from 1958 to 1963, he was exposed to classical music and American jazz. He formed his first band, Koola Lobitos, and they performed a popular Western African dance music, highlife.

After a return to Nigeria, Fela toured the United States in 1969 where the band was renamed Nigeria 70 and he was introduced to the Black Power movement. Upon returning to Lagos later that year, inspired by Malcolm X, he changed his name from the Anglicized "Ransome" to "Anikulapo," which means "one who wears death in his pouch," in Yoruba. The band's name was changed to the Pan-African Afrika 70 and the music evolved into a new style, afrobeat. The driving sound of afrobeat incorporated highlife, rock, and the funk of James Brown and featured multiple electric guitars and African instruments. Lyrics, in the *lingua franca* of pidgin, ridiculed Africans emulating their colonial masters as well as the Nigerian military and government.

The American 1960s counterculture manifested itself in Fela's lifestyle. He openly smoked marijuana and he conducted interviews dressed only in bikini briefs. Fela's outspokenness led to jail time in 1974. In 1977, he declared his commune, the Kalakuta Republic, autonomous and the military responded violently. Upping the ante the following year, Fela staged a mass wedding to twenty-seven women and then entered politics with his Movement of the People Party. An emphasis on politics over music caused band members, including drummer Tony Allen, to quit, and the music suffered.

In 1981, the band was renamed Egypt 80, reflecting Fela's spiritual conversion that was informed by Egyptologist and Afrocentrist thought. At Fela's nightclub, the Shrine, performances were preceded by elaborate Yoruba ceremonies. For most of the remainder of Fela's career, political dissidence overshadowed the music. Fela died of AIDS in 1997.

Fela's influence was felt by David Byrne, Brian Eno, Jimmy Cliff, Miles Davis, Branford Marsalis, James Brown and Bootsy Collins. Many rap and hip-hop artists have sampled Fela and DJs mix Fela with dance music to create afro-house. Ginger Baker, Lester Bowie and Roy Ayers collaborated with Fela. Fela's son Femi carries on his political and musical heritage and is a leading AIDS activist. Recent tributes include the 2002 CD *Red, Hot + Riot: The Music and Spirit of Fela Kuti* (2002) and "Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti," an exhibition organized by the New Museum in 2003.

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