

Air treatment for the legend

By Benson Idonije

Fela's death and burial engaged the attention of the entire media for two whole weeks recently. The volume of coverage was astounding and prodigious, a reality which Reuben Abati methodically spelt out last Friday with facts and figures indicating every newspaper's extent of involvement. But this same unprecedented level of commitment cannot be said to be traceable to the electronic media which was supposed to take advantage of the element of immediacy in the reportage of news and events as they unfolded themselves.

However, Ray Power 100FM took the lead from day number one with a marathon broadcast of the legend's music till the next day. It was also there in full force with prompt immediacy to cover the proceeding and activities of a night vigil for Fela at powerhouse club, Ikeja and; of the lying in state at Tafawa Balewa Square, interviewing people from various walks of life who had come to pay their last respects to the departed legend. This same outside broadcast coverage was extended to the burial as the O Bvan broadcast van occupied a vantage section of the Gbemisola residence of the late Afrobeat legend, very early in the morning, describing the scene, talking to people, identifying dignitaries and generally painting a vivid picture of the surging crowd. Without mincing words, the station scored another point there, while all the others were content with occasional news reports which they reflected in their news bulletins.

It was an occasion for television to demonstrate and celebrate its traditional lead over radio with motion picture and visual advantage, but while AIT, DBN and Channels came up with special news coverages, NTA depended on occasional mention in Network news and other bulletins.

I was however pleasantly amazed to see NTA's first remarkable attempt at the coverage reflected by "Show Time" last Saturday August 16.

The production featured music by the legend himself; interviews and vox pop which were conducted with relevant individuals who were qualified to pontificate on the life and times of Fela. The line up included Steve Rhodes who spoke about the significance of Fela's music. Odion Iruoje discussed his studio recording exploits with him at the EMI in the early seventies. Emmanuel Ngomali who played bass with the Fela Ransome-Kuti quintet in 1964 was however merely asked to discuss Fela's social behaviour and responsibility when he was the one most qualified to speak on the evolution of the music. Respondents to vox pop also included people of relevance and substance, the likes of Rasheed Gbadamosi, Fran and Tunde Kuboye and they all spoke eloquently.

The programme which took the form of a specialised magazine, succeeded in eliciting information because the presenter-interviewer asked questions from a reservoir of residual knowledge. Ray Michael Nwachukwu was around to see the ebb and flow of highlife and Afrobeat on the scene. It was informative.

However, coming out for viewing only last Saturday, the programme failed to tell the whole story as it did not reflect the burial ceremonies either in terms of pictures or mere mention. For what the edition of this programme was worth, the subject matter needed to be conclusively treated with no stone unturned.

On the other hand an attempt was made at a news documentary production the previous day on the same station by a private producer. Titled "News Dimensions" it covered all the aspects of the death and used Charley Boy and various other situational activities as inserts. Link-continuity took the form of presentation, reducing an otherwise serious programme that needed narration to light heartedness. Needless to say that the language itself was far from that of the documentary.

I took part in "Soni Irabor live" on AIT the Thursday before the burial, and the entire programme was devoted to Fela. I saw it as a good programme, from the point of view of selection of participants which included Seun, Fela's son my humble self and Mr. Avantario, Fela's Italian business associate of 14 years standing in Europe. But if the programme must aspire to its model CNN's "Larry King Live", Soni needs a lot more preparation in terms of researching into topics of discussions and other issues, to give it the depth and authoritative treatment of Larry King himself.

The underlying objective behind all these television programmes was to tell the story of a musical giant as vividly and convincingly as they could, painting the picture with music, interviews, vox pop, effects and other sound and pictorial elements.

These varied components of actuality needed to be carefully assembled and treated with utmost creativity for the viewing pleasure of all.

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