

# Fela: Some Mothers Do Have Them

By Benson Idonije

Just as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti generated a lot of controversy while he lived, his death has also aroused mixed feelings and reactions from home and abroad.

The international community, for instance, has hailed him as a music giant and an African genius with great ideological leaning? And from the way he was celebrated all through the week in Britain, America, Canada, Brazil, France and all other European countries, it is obvious that they hold him in high esteem. But at home here in Nigeria, opinion seems divided.

There are those who are determined to play down every other circumstance to extol Fela's virtues as a talented musician who has helped to put Nigeria on the map through creating a significantly dominant music genre. And there are those who are predicating their grouse on the fact that he was a bad influence on his numerous followers, most of them the youth, who are now hooked on marijuana because they accepted him as a role model.

They are also bothered by the circumstances that surrounded his death - pointer to the fact that he liked women. And why not? I belong to the first category. As a matter of fact, it was his artistic creativity that brought us together in 1963 and kept us until his death last week. I am strongly advocating that his unconventional habits, his iconoclastic leaning are all part of his personal and private life which the public should not worry about. He should be seen purely from the point of view of his extraordinary creativity.

He was an innovator, a great artiste and a highly talented musician.

Artistic geniuses like Fela are known for unconventional behaviours which help to open their minds to creativity and enhance artistic development.

Charlie Parker was perhaps the greatest innovator in Jazz history, inventing a revolutionary style of improvisation that gave birth to modern jazz. He virtually dictated the use of its performance on the saxophone. All the modernists, including John Coltrane and Sonny Rolins who later adopted their individual styles, were influenced on the instrument by the late great Charlie Parker. But he lived on drugs and eventually died of an overdose of heroine in 1955. He lived for only 35 years.

Billy Holiday was perhaps the greatest female singer that jazz ever produced. Taking over from Bessie Smith, she knew how to reduce the melody of a song to its basic elements, reconstructing it to suit her own interpretation of the lyric. She died from narcotics in 1959. She lived for 44 years. Miles Davis, Lee Morgan, all the innovators had their various encounters with drugs. The list is long.

Fela abhorred hard drugs because, according to him, they are deadly. I know that he expelled one of his aides for refusing to refrain from cocaine and heroine. He smoked marijuana which he referred to as "Nigerian natural grass" for the enhancement of his artistic creativity, but the young guys who came to the Shrine smoked for the sake of getting high.

The truth is that most of these boys were smoking before they met Fela and saw his environment as a safe zone to hide and do the thing. This was their primary motive for going to the Shrine. As a matter of fact before he died, he was contemplating a shift towards a more appreciative clientelle. When I suggested to him after his successful show

at the MUSON centre last March to begin to play at prestigious venues where he could meet his real clientele, he himself complained that, at the Shrine, the boys call him the Michael Jackson of Africa. This is far from being a compliment. It is only a manifestation of the fact that they don't understand his music.

However, Fela himself did not start smoking until his 1969 tour of America which lasted for one year. Although the trip was a failure in terms of financial reward, it marked the beginning of an era in his career as it provided for him an unprecedented political and cultural awakening. This exposed him to the progressive ideology of 'Blackism'. It was a period when, more than ever before, the blacks rediscovered themselves through pressure groups like the 'black panther movement'. This ideological crusade sometimes became violent, resulting in the killings of musicians that included trumpeter, Lee Morgan and saxophonist, King Curtis.

Fela went to America as a gentleman, clean with highlife music which sang about love and was also abhorred on social commentaries. This was irrelevant to that revolutionary period, and the music seemed, in the present circumstances, to be less than colonially oriented stuff which was devoid of force and African roots.

Fela himself saw and felt it. He was forced by prevailing circumstances to fall in line with his own interpretation of the black music that was the focus of the revolution. The heavy music machine was loaded with the politics of rebellion, confrontation and it needed marijuana to stimulate and energise it.

It will however be interesting to know that up till this new re-awakening, Fela abhorred cigarette smoking. And for his drink, it was something orange, preferably, Fanta.

At that time, some members of the Koola Lobitos were already hooked on marijuana. I still remember that whenever these people came to the stage with stoned face, Fela quarrelled violently with them and called them names. I also remember that each time this particular set of boys came late to the bandstand from break, he asked me to fine them because he knew they had visited the 'hemp house'. He did not only tell them off, he also went further to ensure that the money was deducted from their salaries at the end of the month.

Fela loved women alright, but AIDS infection does not depend on promiscuity per se. One isolated intervention is enough to contract the HIV virus.

"Oyejo," as we used to call ourselves, has always loved women - at least since I knew him in 1963; and he was then more sexually active, considering his age, but he was kicking and full of life. The venereal diseases that were prevalent at the time were gonorrhoea and perhaps syphilis which were curable.

As a result of his superstardom, he settled down and was confined to his house in later days. But in those days, he was a night crawler and night time was the right time. Some of his escapades were exciting, adventurous and even dangerous. Looking back to reminisce on those days, I still remember some of them.

As a bachelor, I lived initially in a one bedroom apartment which was for Fela's base, a member place. Fela was handsome, jovial, humorous and his music was new, exciting and propelling. The girls loved him. He often woke me up at night each time they wanted to meet, and as soon as I heard their footsteps on the corridor in my sleep, I came out with a mat to continue an uninterrupted sleep. But there was this day that Oyejo came in with the first one at 1.30am and left. He brought in another one at about a quarter to 3 o'clock in the morning and left at 4a.m.

I then returned to bed and squared up to have some sleep before the dawn of day. Surprisingly, Oyejo came in with a third one at a few minutes to five, and struggling between sleep and tiredness. I was forced to deny them of their fun saying, "Oyejo, do me a favour, give me a little break. Allow me to sleep, I beg." He pitied me and left, and, until he died, because of the retentive memory that he had, he quoted me verbatim as he told the story jocularly to friends.

Oyejo was a brave man who loved adventure, and if he wanted any woman, nothing could stop him. He often clashed with some of the most powerful 'area boys' on the scene in those days - the likes of Mighty Joe, Chico, Abu amongst others who, because of their brutal strength; had the most beautiful girls to themselves at the time. They clashed because they all liked the same type of slim, beautiful women.

There was this fateful day at Central Hotel, Yaba where Rex Lawson was playing. Oyejo had dated one of the girls, and they were together. Somebody had gone to tell her "strong" boyfriend that Oyejo was at the club with his woman. In the mean time, a message had been left with the gate man to say that if the "strong man" comes, Oyejo should be alerted. As soon as the gateman signalled Oyejo, he got the message and went through the back door with the girl into his car and drove off. But, unfortunately, the strongman had seen them and decided to give them a good chase in a taxi.

Oyejo was a good driver, one of the best in the country at the time. After chasing themselves through nooks and crannies, traversing almost the whole of Lagos, the taxi driver was lost in the chase. Oyejo gained the upper hand.

I remember yet another adventure that was fraught with danger, an encounter with an army officer in 1964. We had gone to Mayflower Hotel, Mushin, Lagos, to listen to the late Roy Chicago and his Rhythm Dandis. There, he was a beautiful girl sitting beside the army officer. "Oyejo, I must go with that girl tonight," he told me. I advised that it was impossible because she had come with her man. He went on stage and, as guest of the band, he went on display with his trumpet. At the end of his exciting and inspiring solos which were understandably jazz-oriented, the whole crowd, including the girl of his fancy, clapped and gave him ovation.

As soon as the band struck the first note of the next highlife number, Oyejo moved across promptly to ask the girl for a dance. "The army officer who also admired him obliged without any hesitation.

Oyejo familiarised himself with the girl while dancing and she gave him another date because she had to go home that night with her man. Oyejo was not ready to take no for an answer. He wanted her that night.

At the end of the show, the girl went with the officer and Oyejo decided we should trail them behind. I told him it was a dangerous and fruitless adventure sine it was not possible to forcibly take the girl from him. We argued over the rationale for this wild goose chase but he was adamant. I could not leave a dear friend in the cold like that, so I followed.

We trailed their car from Mushin to Yaba where they entered the army barracks. We parked away from them and they knew it. As soon as they came out we continued to follow them from behind. Their car went round and round until they eventually entered Abalti Barracks at Obalende. But before we could enter, the sentinel stopped us. All the same, we parked by the side of the main road, overlooking the main entrance. Twice we were threatened by soldiers to leave that vicinity but my friend did not budge. Oyejo and I

waited in vain. That was really dangerous. However, if any one tries that kind of thing now, he would be dead.

Another interesting one to remember is the case of the two famous girl friends who need to vie for equal attention from Oyejo. Each had her own outing date, but because they both were jealous and knew his arrangement, they sometimes came at the same time, each struggling to gain the upper hand.

Oyejo easily coped with the situation on the nights that the band did not play, but there was this day that the band had a big show at Kakadu hotel, Yaba and one of them came and prevented prevent him from playing. This was the highlife era when this trumpet mattered much in the instrumentation of the band.

I pleaded for a long time before she eventually let go of the instrument. The boys had gone on stage forty five minutes before Fela joined, a phenomenon that was unusual at the time. The crowd had been angry and disgruntled. From then on, somebody was specially assigned to watch over the trumpet to avoid a reoccurrence.

Fela was kind hearted, humane, peace loving and law abiding. He was not a trouble maker but he was surrounded by sycophants and rascals who took advantage of his popularity and fame to commit atrocities. The burning of Kalakuta Republic in 1977, for instance, was remotely sparked off by his boys who had an ugly encounter with soldiers.

Fela's death is a big blow to the entire music industry, but his music is enough legacy. As I said in a BBC interview last Monday, Fela is from a very responsible family and they should be commended for telling the truth about the cause of his death. Some other families would have easily swept it under the carpet and put it down to some other ailment.

Oyejo, rest in perfect peace.

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