

Remembering Fela Anikulapo Kuti

By Benson Idonije

Culture, they say is dynamic. And more than any other musician in Africa. Fela Anikulapo Kuti who should have been 60 yesterday identified with the dynamic process of Nigeria's cultural evolution in a progressively logical manner - till his death, on August 2, 1997.

Opon leaving Abeokuta Grammar School Fela worked briefly with a Federal Ministry in Lagos. This was in 1957 and Victor Olaiya's highlife outfit was one of the most popular and influential at the time. Because of the intensity of his musical inclination, which he perhaps inherited from his parent, he frequented the Cool Cats Inn where he featured regularly as guest singer. And by the time he traveled the following year to study music at the Trinity College, London, Olaiya's king of highlife was the one closest to his heart even though he was studying trumpet in the classical mould.

Little wonder then when he eventually formed the Koola Lobitos outfit in London while still in school, with among others, Wole Bucknor on piano, his initial recording efforts were in the highlife style of Victor Olaiya as exemplified by his singles such as Fere, Bonfo and Labitos special.

A restless and talented atiste, Fela soon ventured into modern jazz, having been influenced by the likes of Miles Davis. That Jones, Lee Morgan, three of the most prolific and influential trumpet players of that period.

He formed a Fela Ransome-Kuti quintet which he fronted on trumpet. By the time he left England in 1963, his quintet had recorded a jazz album, a white label which did not eventually see the light of day in terms of record release.

However, by the time we met that same year in Legos, Fela was already as accomplished jazz musician, doubling on piano and trumpet. He took his music seriously practising his trumpet eight hours daily, running scales and and exerises. He took his trumpet case every where he went and seized every available time to blow his horn. He became proficient. His notes were clean, his phrases were evocative, and his solos remarkably inventive.

He talked me into assembling and managing a jazz group for him, and the likes of Emmanuel Ngomali, on bass; John Bull, drums, Don Amechi guitar, were immediately brought together for rehearsals. Fela, for his own part doubled on piano and trumpet.

This quintet played gigs around, essentially for creative listening, for artistic fulfilment - without any appreciable remuneration to show for it in terms of financial reward.

However, as if by divine intervention. Fela's mother strongly advised that we go back to highlife. Actually, what she had in mind was the Victor Olaiya - oriented highlife that he played in London, but Fela was a different musician. He had become jazz-based.

We immediately raised the Nigerian tradition of the Koola Lobitos with among others, Tony Allen drums; Ojo Okeji bass guitar. Easy Aka, Conga, Lekan Animasahun, baritone saxophone, Isaac Olasugba, alto saxophone with Fela himself doubling on trumpet and vocals.

Rehearsals started in earnest in November 1964, and launched out in May 1965, it was already boasting a sizeable repertoire of over twenty highlife songs. And of course the approach to performance was jazz-oriented.

And, characteristic of all the highlife treatment was a brilliant arrangement that took on a five part harmony technique, with the horns creating riffs that established question and answer periods. Solos on all the sessions were shared by Fela on trumpet and Isaac Olasugba on alto saxophone.

It usually took the band quite some time to master their various parts at rehearsals which were protracted. The music was scored for every instrument, including the drums. And because of the peculiar arrangements, the Koola Lobitos which was only a nine piece band at the time, produced the sound of a big band, comparable to the orchestras of Fletcher Handersons. Duke Ellington. Count Basie, among others.

Fela went on a tour of America in 1969 with jazz oriented highlife which was not new to America because it was the kind of jazz fusion that they were already used to. The likes of Dizzy Gillespie. Sunny Rollins, Ahmed Jamal among others had popularized Latin and Afro Cuban interpretations. The tour - was not financially rewarding.

Fortunately for him, there was in 1969, a black awareness in America that reached an unprecedented level in terms of activism. It gave rise to the emergence of black power movements of various dimensions. It brought about a general feeling of cultural reawakening.

In addition to experiencing a political and cultural renaissance. Fela was exposed to the then new wave of jazz, the free form typified by the exploits of Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane. It was in 1969 that Miles Davis established the point that jazz could do without a clear cut beginning and a defined end, with the historic performance of "In a silent way". This new jazz helped to devise a non Western musical approach which would resist the comprehension and exploitation of white musicians. It was perceived by many as expressing the anger and frustration of the younger generation of Afro Americans.

Fela was thoroughly influenced by this new wave of jazz as well as the prevailing political awakening. The resultant effect for Fela was a new sound identity, a one man's fusion against the background of his own cultural influences back home in Nigeria and Africa. The Koola Lobitos became Africa 70 and the music metamorphosed from highlife to Afrobeat songs like "My lady's frustration", "War is not the answer" Oporo among others were the first to be created in this new idiom. But it was "Jean Koko" that eventually provided the desired breakthrough.

The music waxed stronger when with the call of Igo Chico who in fact established the saxophone phenomenon and sound identity for Afro beat. Fela took on the instrument as a challenge, relinquishing the trumpet and doubling on keyboards, for him the saxophone became a medium of self expression for his phrases and other ideas. Female voices were brought in to compliment and establish call-and-response patterns. The ensemble sound came out like a heavy music machine giving rise to themes like Yellow Fever, Expensive shit, J.J. D among others.

Fela's Afro beat however shifted from mere social commentaries to political motivation when he began to confront the authorities, accusing them of competition and pointing out various ills in the society. Events grew to a head in 1977 when his house was burnt down but *Zombie Coffin* for head of state. Authority stealing, Blood sorrow and Tears and some of his politically motivated hits of this period.

Understandably, Fela's music began to take a more aggressive turn in the late 70's , heading on to the emergence of Egypt 80 in terms of metamorphosis.

The Egypt 80 Band nearly doubled in size compared with Africa 70. Fela increased the size of the horn section and included a rhythm piano. His compositions for Egypt '80 became longer, more complex-Arrangements such as *Customs check point*, "Just like that and *Music against second slavery* as a big band composer and arranger. This new trend began in 1985 with *Beast of no nation*.

Looking towards traditional models for instruction. Fela further enlarged the vocal chorus section, added traditional drums such as *gbedu*, writing in purely traditional structure in works such a *Government Chicken Boy* with rhythms rooted in *Apala*, *Confusion break bone*, wedded in *wora*. All of this took Fela's music to a higher dimension he called *Classical African music*.

Vocal themes became highly political, taking on a more intentional dimension. The Africaness of the music became emphasized with a rhythm section that took on intricate percussion and African drumming. And of course the characteristic call and response phenomenon of African music was brought to full focus.

The logical progression of this music should have continued to evolve into the future, unchecked, unrestrained, flowing freely. But it was terminated by his untimely death on August 2, 1997.