

The global music role model

By Benson Idonije

When Fela Ransome Kuti was struggling to create an authentic and popularly acceptable sound identity for himself in 1965, he probably was unaware that his music would eventually receive international recognition of this magnitude.

By the time Fela Anikulapo died last Saturday, he had reached a peak in the evolution of his music, and a high level of performance. The legacy he has left behind is perhaps the greatest, most influential that any musician in Africa has bequeathed to Africa's cultural evolution and the entire world.

As an innovator, his music has influenced a young generation of musicians in Nigeria and abroad. Many more are likely to join the bandwagon but the likes of Bisade Ologunde, Kola Ogunkoya, Dede Mabiadu, Femi Anikulapo Kuti, and Kayode Olajide are leaders of their various groups which are following hard on the heels of Fela whom they see as their idol.

In America where jazz musicians are looking forward to Africa for inspiration, Fela's music has become the 'new wave' and his approach to contemporary African music is being adopted.

Trumpet player Lester Bowie of the Art Ensemble of Chicago was here in 1977 and, apart from guesting with the Africa 70 at the shrine he also took active part in a number of recording sessions, soloing on trumpet in such evergreens as "Dog eat dog," "No agreement," among others. In America, Lester Bowie has recorded his own version of "Zombie" which is a cross between avant-garde and free-wheeling modern jazz.

Way back 1977, tenor man Huston Person recorded a soul-rock version of Fela's "I No Get Eye for Back," and quite recently saxophonist Bradford Marsalles improvised creatively on the entire musical background and rhythmic concept of "Beast of no nation" which served as an entrance point to the current phase of Fela's development of "African music."

Generally, a quite revolution is taking place in almost all the jazz cities in America with Fela's music helping to influence the direction of today's jazz.

This high and widely acceptable level of artistic performance no doubt has been attained through talent and musicianship but he also had his own influence both from home and abroad.

Before he travelled to England to study music at the Trinity College of Music, England, as a student and worker he frequented Victor Olaiya's Cool Cats and guested with the All Stars which was perhaps the leading and most popular highlife band in the late fifties. Victor Olaiya's influence manifested itself remarkably in the very initial singles that the Koola Lobitos recorded in songs like "Fere", "Koola Lobitos lawa nfde," among

others, and featured Fela on trumpet with Wole Bucknor sustaining the rhythm section on piano.

These singles served as Fela's first music outing and the medium through which I knew him as he played trumpet with a tonal conception that smacked of immaturity but exhibited a lot of talent, as his playing was intense and full of ideas in terms of phrases and solos.

But perhaps the influences that propelled him to action are those of Miles Davis and Mad Jones, two trumpeters who had nothing in common. Fela liked Miles Davis for his economy of notes, his single notes and short phrases which spoke volumes. But he admired Mad Jones because he was unpredictable.

All the fans and other listeners to Fela's music from the seventies would miss perhaps one of the greatest, most progressive trumpeters on the scene. Evidence of this can only be heard and felt on his highlife stint of the sixties where he shared solos with Isaac Olasagba, a fine alto saxophone player in well arranged highlife songs the beauty of which lay more on instrumentation where the horns established call and response patterns. He played trumpet up till the Afrobeat era in 1970 when the instrument gave way to the organ, doubling on vocals.

From the dynamics of Fela's music from the beginning till he died a steady progression to maturity and complexity can be observed with time.

"Ololufe" and "Aywani" began the highlife era that gave response to the already drab highlife scene of the mid-sixties, "Jean Ko ku" marked the transition to Afrobeat in 1970 from highlife, and "Beat of no nation" opened a new perspective for "African music in 1985.

The impact of Fela's music is perhaps more felt on the international scene than at home here in Nigeria and Africa. Considering the rich cultural dimension of his music, the progressively creative approach to the accomplishment of the music, Fela, has made a tremendously valuable contribution to the arts.

Fela is not dead. He will continue to live as long as his music remains with us. Source: Benson Idonije; Stern's Guide to Contemporary African Music by Ronnie Graham.

..... from the basket mouth

Fela, the typical talk basket was at its best in March during his successful debut concert at the prestigious MUSON Centre, Lagos.

There he took a long session out of his two-hour show to descend heavily on the press. He lambasted the fourth estate of the realm for its seeming excesses and for allegedly, misunderstanding the real impact of his music.

But he also addressed other issues like marriage: "Many people do not understand the spiritual force behind the institution of marriage which happens between a husband and wife.

"The name husband which connotes 'horse band' means that the man is not even the horse, he is just the band owned by the horse. The horse most times dictates the sound of the band.

"Even wife or 'waif' according to the dictionary means 'a stranger that belongs to no one,' hence the wife is nobody's property.

"We have lost our sovereignty (in Africa) to western education and intellectualism. We have gone too deep into white men's ways.

"In America, the African-American, teaches how to be a true African but here our women turn their natural hair to artificial ones through perming. We must learn how to make business in our own way. We do everything to change our culture in the name of civilisation."