

Tribute to a worthy master

By Benson Idonije

Dede's Underground Sound has been on voluntary recess in the last three to four months during which time they have tried to consolidate their sound identity with daily rehearsals at number seven Sylvan Crescent, Anthony Village, Lagos. The band has decided to launch out and bounce back to the scene with the celebration of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, his former master who died five years ago.

And this is despite the fact that Dede himself does not believe in celebrating death. All along, since 1997, he has always preferred to celebrate his master's birthday which is the 15th of October. But why is he celebrating Fela's death now? His words: "This fifty year is a very powerful one according to what the master has told us. It is a very powerful year, a year of control, a year of command, a year of the full expression of powers that be."

Obviously sounding spiritual, he admitted that he had always been in this realm as far as he could remember and that it has only become more glaring because he is now at liberty to express himself and be heard properly. He however added that "the present level of development be credited to the great one, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti."

Since he left this world to meet his ancestors five years ago, Fela's popularity has not only assumed legendary proportions, awareness for his music on the international scene has reached an unprecedented level. Afro beat has reached the level where Bob Marley, reggae's foremost practitioner took it; and its fire is raging all over Europe where various foreign bands including Anti-Ballas are crusading the music. In addition to Femi Kuti's tours round the world with his Positive Force who are presently dishing out Afrobeat in a fierce and forceful form, Fela's former sidemen such as key boardist Dele Sosimi and drummer Tony Allen are helping to direct the course of Afrobeat by emphasizing its basic elements.

Paris - based Tony Allen, a pioneering drummer for the Afrobeat phenomenon who in fact began this percussive vibes from the Koola Lobitos days, appears to be operating from a more vantage point. Or so it seems. As the man who dictates the rhythmic beat of Afrobeat, he sees himself as the custodian of the most vital element of the fusion called Afrobeat, and is presently reaching out for sale, varying rhythmic patterns which bands all over Europe are adopting in their various outfits - most of which are steeped in electronic devices and settings.

At home here in Nigeria, of the long list of groups keeping the spirit of Afrobeat alive, Dede's Underground sound is perhaps the most consistent and committed. Often referred to as Fela's alter ego, Dede is perhaps the only disciple who has imbibed Fela's traits including his life-style and ideology. He owes his everything to Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and believes that Fela has made a strong impact on even the larger society. His words: "First he opened my mind to the truth in its entirety. He has taught us to focus entirely on our culture; open our minds to the reality of what and who we are; create in us that inner strength to carry the mantle of total emancipation of us Africans to proper spiritual upliftment."

A powerful and potent element of Fela's music is the message which became political and ideological in later years as opposed to the love songs and social commentaries that characterised the highlife days of the Koola Lobitos and the early Afrobeat years in such times as *Ololufe* (1965). *Yellow fever* (1974) Dede has since imbibed the politically motivated spirit behind such melodies as *Beast of no nations* (1984) done in defence of human rights; and such patriotic effort as *Buy Africa*, His words: "Fela taught me and all well meaning Africans to realise that as Africans, we are the greatest people created by God in this world. He advised that we should always think Africa, respect Africa, buy Africa and celebrate the pride of Africa."

One of the reasons why most African countries remain backward and underdeveloped today is that rather than cherish the cultures of their heritage, rather than promote and patronise what they have, they choose to embrace foreign values. A case in point is the preference of our radio stations for American music. The implication of what they have continued to do is that the country gets poorer and poorer and the developed countries continue to be enriched.

Our own musicians continue to suffer starvation from abject poverty while foreign artists daily smile to the bank, in affluence. Another lesson Dede said he learnt from Fela is the ability to conquer fear, saying:

"Oppressive and destructive forces are strongly with us. All it takes is for us to reach out without fear, speak out without fear, act without fear". Continuing he explains: "Fela advised that we should conquer fear because that is the main killer of man. Like the message from his CD, *STB* where he says *E no wan ndie, papa de for house. I wan enjoy, so police go slap you, you no go fit talk. Army go whip your yansh, you go de look like donkey. Head of state go thief, nobody fit hala... because of fear.*"

Dede Mabiaku truly believes in Fela and has imbibed all his ideals. But unknown to many, his music has overtime evolved and cannot be said to be imitative of Fela, Dede is presently exploiting the rhythms of the Itsekiri people of Delta State whose percussive essence he's fusing perfectly with Afro feeling in the process of crafting a new highlife variant.

Dede's singing style is a far cry from his mentor's approach in that rather than limit his pace to the rather calculated and deliberate style of Fela, he adopts a conventional singing approach, which most time finds him feeling his voice through rapid notes in the semi quaver and semi-demi quaver regions.

The band itself has continued to take on a protean orchestral outlook with ensemble sounds becoming more consolidated. Soloists, especially the new trumpeter has added a new feeling to the music in terms of tonal conception and solo capability. Dede's *Underground African Sound* has launched out once again.