

Why Fela went for the military interview

By Benson Idonije

Fela did not like the military profession to the extent that he wanted to join it. He was schemed into considering the job, but eventually he showed them he didn't need it, revealed Benson Idonije, Fela's first manager, who accompanied him to the interview in the early 60s.

The authenticity and great potential of the music proved that Fela is a committed artist who allowed his focus to override every other consideration.

During the jazz era before the birth of the Koola Lobitos for instance, he had the opportunity to become the Director of music, Nigerian Army but he was not interested. All the connection had been put in place by his mother and other powerful well wishers in authority, but because he did not want to prove ungrateful by turning down their well-meaning and kind gesture, he attended the interview to placate them.

Instead of answering questions, he turned the interview into a lecture and expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the music of the band.

He told the then white Director of music from whom he was supposed to eventually take over that if he was appointed, he would change the colonial concept of the band's repertoire of marching music.

Fela also quarrelled with the ensemble sound which he said was rough, expressing that if he got the job he would line up all the instrumentalists on the field for six months to practice their seals and exercise in order to improve their tonal conception, a rudimentary assignment which they should have gone through before attempting to play any sounds at all.

Quite naturally, the Director was not happy. He saw Fela remarks as an indictment, and did not recommend him for the job.

The truth was that Fela did not want a job that would deprive him of his absolute freedom which he cherished highly. He also hated the discipline and regimentation that went with the job.

He however preferred to settle for the less prestigious job of producer of music at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation because it gave him freedom to move around and play the music of his choice.

I knew Fela through his Victor Olaiya-influenced highlife with his London based Koola Lobitos. While in London, in the course of his study at the Trinity College of Music, herecorded on single plays such fascinating tunes as "Fere" "Bonfo," "Lobitos Special", among others.

Fela's mother brought these singles to the then Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation at Ikoy, Lagos for promotional airplay; and I did justice to them as a young broadcaster for what the music was worth. As a matter of fact the music added a new dimension to Victor Olaiya highlife, especially from the point of view of solo stints which Fela shared on trumpet with a West Indian saxophonist. Wole Bucknor's piano sounded remarkable as the pace setter for the music's harmonic progression an essential ingredient of the rhythm section unit.

When Fela eventually came back from England in 1963, he listened to radio for a number of weeks and decided one Thursday night to link up with me at the NBC studio while I was presenting a late night programme of "NBC Jazz Club". He admired my knowledge of jazz, and I appreciated him for his musicianship.

He had come along with a white labelled album of the jazz quintet that he led before he left England. Titled The Fela Ransome-Kuti Quintet, it featured him on trumpet, a west Indian on tenor saxophone with a piano - bass - drum format. I played the music on the programme and interviewed him. We became friends, and as an extension of this session, we decided to form a Fela Ransome-Kuti Quintet here in Nigeria, which I managed, featuring Don Amechi on guitar, Emmanuel Ngomali on bass; John Bull on drum; Fela Ransome-Kuti and the late Sid Moses, piano, and of course the essential solos were by Fela Ransome-Kuti himself on trumpet and piano.

The quintet played at the Cool Cats Inn, Apapa Road, Lagos; and also gigged around various parts of Lagos and Ibadan to appreciative audiences in schools and colleges.

Towards the end of 1964, Fela's mother, who obviously had a strong hold and influence on him, advised us to go back to the highlife that he started in England with the Koola Lobitos as she did not seem to be pleased with the commercially barren jazz that we played. Fela agreed and we immediately started sourcing for equipment and musicians.

We went to Togo to buy guitars and microphone but relied on locally made amplifiers which we hired on regular basis whenever the need arose, because we could not afford to buy the local type.

Some of the initial members of the new Koola Lobitos were congo player Easy Adio. Bassist Ojo Okeji and Drummer Tony Allen whom I took from Adeolu Akinsaya's Western Toppers at Mushin after carefully listening to their individual capacities within the context of Adeolu's aggregation. Baritone saxophonist Lekan Animashaun, now leader of Fela's band and the only surviving original members, was contracted from Chris Ajilo and His Cubanos. Alto saxophone player Isaac Olasugba was contacted at Ondo, having just arrived from Abijan, about to join Eddy Okonta and His Top Aces at Ibadan.

The band settled down to rehearse a number of highlife tunes which were understandably jazz-oriented. The rhythm was strong and compelling; the songs had potential for rebellion and aggression; an unprecedented five-part harmony technique

replete with riffs and figures that established call-and-response patterns the ensemble sound was fascinating, new and exciting to dance to.