

JAZZ MUSIC INFLUENCES ON THE WORK OF FELA ANIKULAPO-KUTI

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Of all Nigeria's popular musicians, bandleader Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is probably the most associated with jazz music. Although his music contains a number of jazz elements, however, Fela does not play 'jazz' in the traditional stylistic sense of the term. Nevertheless, there are reasons why his music is so strongly associated with jazz in Nigeria, and I intend to examine some of those reasons in this essay. The major questions I will address are: One, what are the specific jazz elements in Fela's Afrobeat? Two, how did these come to exist in his music? Three, to what extent can Afrobeat be called jazz style? Hopefully, this discussion will demonstrate the process by which Fela gradually distilled jazz elements into a distinctly African form, while clarifying the relationship between jazz and Afrobeat on the stylistic, symbolic and functional levels.

Fela may be placed in a generation of world musicians born during the 1930s who fused jazz with a variety of local styles to achieve international recognition. Among these are Hugh Masekela of South Africa, Abdullah

Ibrahim, p.k.a. Dollar Brand of South Africa, Randy Weston of U.S.A. and Hermeto Pascoal of Brazil. The issue of Afrobeat and jazz is complicated by the conflicting cultural perspectives which frequently occur when any artistic expression crosses cultural borders and assumes a new functional and symbolic identity. Fundamentally an African-American expression, jazz has in fact been subjected to a variety of new interpretations in cultural spheres as dissimilar as Japan, West Africa, Russia and Western Europe. While Fela's Afrobeat style is strongly associated with jazz in Nigeria, attempts to define his music as jazz have been met with strong resistance in Europe and the United States. An example of this is Afrika '70's headlining performance at the 1978 Berlin Jazz Festival causing a controversy in the German music press in which jazz critics denigrated the musicianship of the Afrika '70 band and Fela in particular. There are several fundamental aspects - political, cultural, religious - which mitigate against Afrobeat's simple characterization as jazz. In spite of this, I will assert that Fela's work - while not 'jazz' in the strict sense - does represent a

contribution to jazz evolution.

In order to provide the widest perspective on the subject, it is necessary to discuss the continuous circulation of musical elements of cultural symbols between West Africa and its descendants in the Americas, a process which has operated at least since the earliest years of this century, influencing stylistic development throughout Africa and the African diaspora. This will enable us to place Fela's work in the larger context of jazz's historic influence upon West African popular music through the time that the Afrobeat style was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It must be noted that many of the musical practices identified as 'jazz' have strong West African origins. They acquired their distinct character through a blending with Western European elements in the Americas, and they in turn served to transform West African music. The current African-American interest in traditional African music and culture, and the reverse influence of African-American expressive forms such as jazz and rap music in contemporary Africa, are merely the

latest examples of a historical cycle of circulating cross-influence. While characterizations of Africa as the 'traditional' and America as the 'modern' are overtly simplistic and essentialist in nature, the symbolic poles of tradition and innovation have contributed equally to the construction of contemporary pan-African identity. Fela's music is an exemplary of this process.

Since the introduction of phonograph recording technology into West Africa in the 1920s, there have been successive phases of jazz influence on the popular music of the region. Ragtime and Dixieland jazz (along with minstrelsy) was popular in the 1920s, while big-band swing styles were popular in the 1930s. The main conduits for the introduction of these styles into West Africa were highlife musicians such as E. T. Mensah and Bobby Benson - musically literate bandleaders who were proficient on Western wind instruments and who had traditionally performed a variety of Western musical genres such as foxtrots, two-steps, waltzes to entertain colonial administrators and African elites.

The jazz influence also took more indirectly, through its presence in other styles which in turn influenced West African music. The influence of Afro-Caribbean styles from Jamaica, Cuba and Trinidad was a decisive turning point for highlife during the 1940s. A creation of African descendants in the Americas, these styles combined transplanted West African rhythms with jazz-derived horn

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liturgical music accompanying the neo-Yoruba Santeria cult in Cuba), European compositional techniques (by jazz composers such as Mario Bauza and Machito), and virtuoso African-American jazz improvisers such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Therein lies one important explanation for the popularity of Afro-Caribbean sounds throughout Africa: the blending of African and European musical elements resulted in a modern, cosmopolitan sound which was the perfect sonic match for the rapid modernization Africa experienced during the colonial and post-colonial period. Thus, the musical fusion of highlife became the music most associated with cultural pride, national identity, and political independence.

The use of the word 'jazz' in the names of many African dance bands of this period (*Bembeya Jazz*, *Rocafil Jazz*) functions on three levels - musically (indicating the presence of jazz stylistic elements in the music), functionally (indicating large dance-bands utilising

Western instruments and performing for upper-class audiences), and symbolically (indicating 'modernity' and international, cosmopolitan identity).

It is the Ghanaian highlife bandleader E. T. Mensah who, with the help of his drummer, Guy Warren (Kofi Ghanaba), is widely credited with integrating modern jazz and

Afro-Caribbean elements into highlife music. Mensah and the **Tempos** caused a storm during the Nigerian tour of the late 1950s. Soon, Nigerian



E. T. Mensah: Highlife impresario.

arrangements. In its most developed form - such as the experiments with Afro-Cuban *Latin Jazz*, important linkages were forged between neo-African musical practices (such as the

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*Pix 1 Sonny Rollins, 2: Miles Davis,
3: Thelonious Monk, 4: John Coltrane,
5: Louis Armstrong*

bandleader Bobby Benson transformed his act from a variety show to Mensah's style of highlife, and begun developing distinctly Nigerian highlife sound with his **Jam Session Orchestra**. Benson's band spawned a host of younger bandleaders including Zeal Onyia, Rex Lawson and Victor Olaiya who gave the young Fela his first performing experience in the 1950s as a singer with his **Cool Cats** highlife band. Fela was already heir to decades of stylistic cross-breeding between jazz and indigenous styles.

Fela's years of study in a British music school during the late 1950s and early 1960s exposed him to newer styles of jazz - the bebop style popularized by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in the 1940s and the modal style popularized by Miles Davis and John Coltrane in the early 1960s. It was initially his goal to introduce these traditional styles to Nigerian audiences upon his return with his **Fela Ransome-Kuti Quartet**. However, this presented a creative quandary. Bebop and modal differed from earlier jazz styles in that they were more abstract and were meant for reflective listening than social dancing. Thus, neither of these styles was particularly popular in Africa, and Fela's first attempts at playing jazz in Nigeria were doomed to failure. Regardless of his inability to attract large numbers of Nigerian jazz listeners, however, jazz remained an important catalyst for the synthesis of African and Western musical traditions.

The mid-1960s found Fela affecting a compromise in his music, playing a style he called *highlife jazz* with his **Koola Lobitos** band. Songs like *Bonfo*, *Fere* and *Lo Wa Se Se* combined the danceability of traditional highlife with elements drawn from jazz such as horn solos, elaborate horn themes, more complex harmonic progressions and big-band style of orchestration. **Koola Lobitos'** music also showed the clear influence of Afro-Cuban music in songs such as *Oritshe* and *Abiara*. However,

Koola Lobitos' music did not meet the success Fela had hoped; Africa was falling under influence of African-American rhythm-and-blues music and popularity of highlife was rapidly declining.

In 1969, Fela and his **Koola Lobitos** band took a year-long trip to the United States where, in addition to experiencing a political and cultural awakening, he was exposed to the latest stylistic phase of jazz. This was the free-jazz typified by the work of Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and the later work of John Coltrane. In addition to representing a radical break with jazz traditions, these styles also carried strong political associations. Concurrently with the cultural awakening African-Americans were experiencing during this period, many African-American free-jazz musicians hoped to devise a non-Western musical logic which would resist comprehension and exploitation by white musicians. Linked to this endeavour was an exploration of sonic parallels to non-Western musical traditions from Africa and India. Finally, free-jazz was perceived by many as expressing the anger and frustrations of the younger generation of African-Americans. As this influence of free-jazz upon Fela took place concurrently with his political awakening, it was inevitable that the style's influence, with its strong political overtones, would be evident in his subsequent work.

During the same period, there was also an indirect jazz influence on Fela transmitted via rhythm-and-blues music, another primary stylistic current in his later works. The best example is the music of James Brown, a major influence whose work had become increasingly politicized by the time of the latter's U.S. visit. Brown integrated free-jazz elements into his style to the extent that he would reinforce this political mood. Thus when, for example, in his 1970 *Super Bad*, he asked his tenor saxophonist Sinclair Pinckney to 'blow me some Trane' (a reference to John

Coltrane), he was making an implicit political statement as well as an obvious musical one.

The influences of these various phases of jazz would be evident in Fela's artistic breakthrough, his Afrobeat music of the 1970s. This music combined a James Brown-styled use of the rhythm section, a modal harmonic approach, jazz-styled instrumental solos and ensemble passages, and indigenous percussion. These elements were all united by traditional West African approach to composition and structuring utilising traditional devices such as call-and-response singing, percussive articulation, ensemble stratification (layering of parts), hocketing (simple parts combining to form complex structures), and extensive use of ostinatos (repeating pattern). The **Afrika '70** band featured a number of strong jazz-styled soloists including Fela (saxophones and keyboards), Lekan Animasaun (baritone saxophone), Tunde Williams (trumpet), Igo Chico (tenor saxophone), and the masterful drum set player Tony Allen. **Afrika '70** Compositions from the 1970s such as *Water No Get Enemy*, *Suegbe Pako* and *Who No Know Go Know* demonstrate the seamless blend of highlife, jazz, Caribbean and soul elements in Fela's music.

Since the late 1970s, Fela has continued to elaborate upon the Afrobeat conception according to both jazz and traditional West African points of reference. His **Egypt '80** band has nearly doubled in size in comparison to **Afrika '70**. He has doubled the size of the horn section, and included a rhythm piano which clearly recalls McCoy Tyner's 'comping' accompaniment of John Coltrane. His compositions for **Egypt '80** have become longer and more complex; recent arrangements such as *Custom Check Point* (1980s), *Just Like That* (1980s) and *Music Against Second Slavery* (1990s) demonstrate his maturing as a big-band composer. The **Egypt '80** band has also introduced a number of

talented new improvisers to the public including Keji Hamilton (bass guitar and piano), Rilwan Fagbemi (baritone saxophone), Yinusa Akinbosun (tenor saxophone), Olu Ifayehun (trumpet), Duro Ikujenyo (piano), Dele Shosimi (piano) and Nwokoma Stephen Nkem (trumpet) among others.

At the same time, Fela has looked toward traditional models for inspiration. He has enlarged the size of the vocal chorus, integrated traditional drums such as the *gbedu*, and composed in traditional meters in works such as *Government Chicken Boy* (based on a typical *apala* pattern) or *Confusion Break Bone* (based on traditional 12/8 triplet rhythm). Since the early 1980s, he has referred to his music as 'classical African music', and the popularity of his work throughout the Black world reflects both his avowed cultural stance and the way in which elements of pan-African musical traditions have fused seamlessly in his work, resulting in a profoundly 'Black' musical mood.

Some listeners have attempted to minimise the jazz element of Fela's music by comparing the band's instrumentalists unfavourably with African-American improvisers, citing the rigidity of Fela's formal structures, or dismissing it as mere popular music with political or high-art pretensions. These listeners neglect that one, virtuosic improvisation in the African-American sense has been the goal primary of these players, functioning as they do in an entirely different musical and cultural

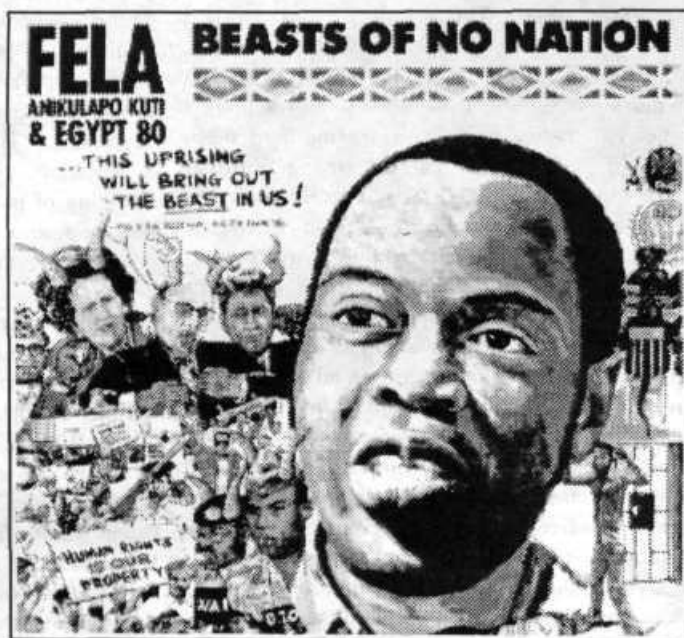
context; two, the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' art are not as distinct in West African culture as they are in the West; and third, the essence of jazz is not reducible to any single criteria such as complexity of improvisations or harmonic density.

Recent neo-conservative definitions of jazz have to equate social dancing with frivolity, banality and lack of artistic or

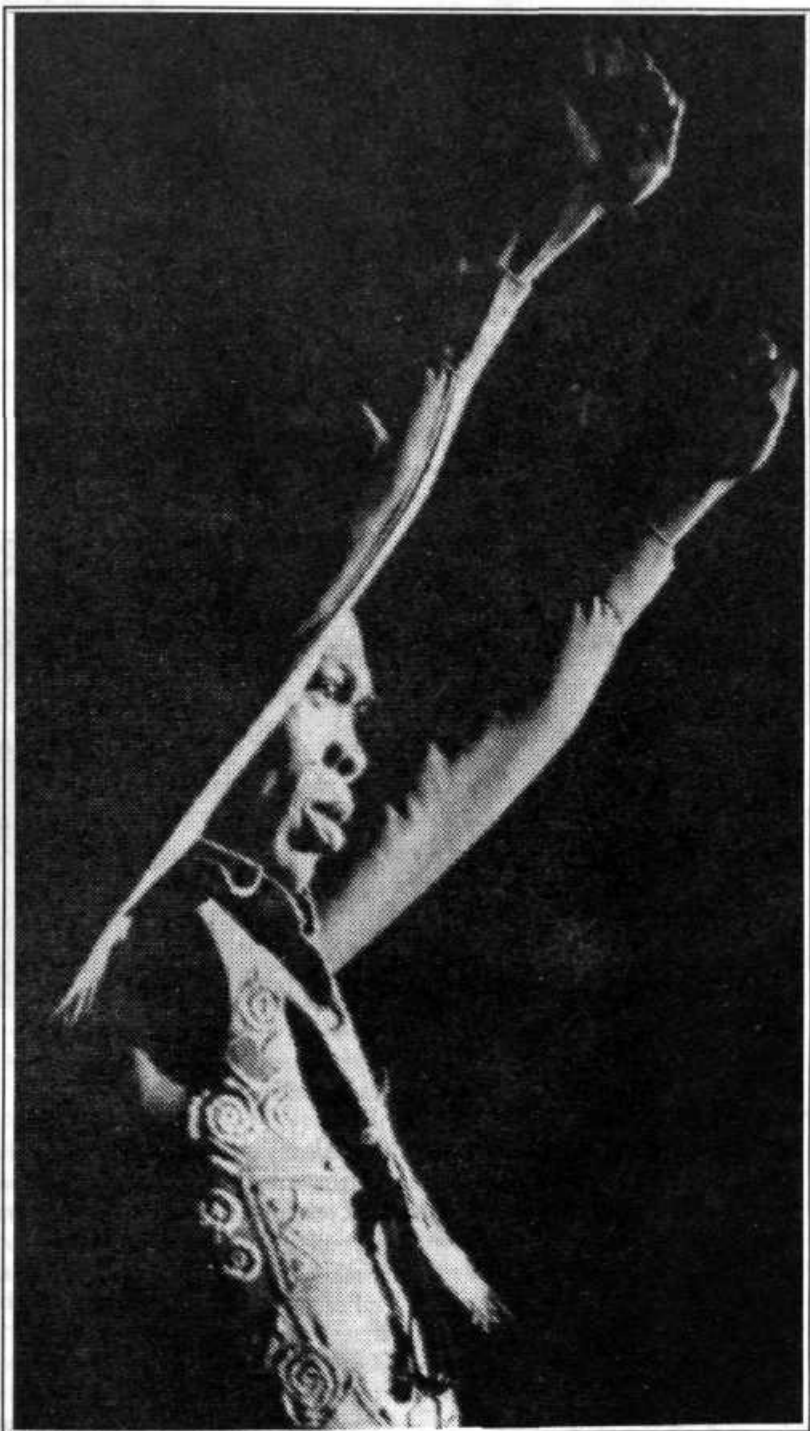
aesthetic purpose and social intent cannot be conveyed through a musical language based in the stylistic norms of the Black world; and, two, any definition of *classicism* must conform to the functional norms of European reflective art music, as opposed to those of Afrocentric social dance genres in which the boundaries between *high*, *popular*, *traditional* and *contemporary* are often indistinct. They neglect the fact that socially-functional communal music in West Africa has long been a vehicle for the most profound insights and that there have been phases of jazz in African-America in which danceability was an important criteria of success.

The neo-conservative arguments are also based on a limited understanding of the jazz 'tradition'. The work most often excluded in the neo-conservative view is that of *avant-garde* musicians like John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra and Art Ensemble of Chicago. Derived from European culture, *avant-garde* has often been used as an umbrella term to designate creative work

which falls outside of the functional or stylistic norms. In the case of African-Americas jazz *avant-garde*, it may be more precise to note that such musicians were attempting to introduce elements of world-permting traditions into African-American jazz practice, integrating non musical artistic media such as dance and poetry. John Coltrane formed musical relationships with Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji and Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar. Ornette Coleman collaborated with Gnawa musicians in Morocco and traditional Yoruba and Hausa musicians in Nigeria. Miles Davis' ensemble of the 1970s featured West African, Caribbean and South Indian musicians and instrumentation, while Sun Ra's



philosophical depth. These moves are clearly politically-motivated and attempt to position jazz as an equal of European art music by emphasizing its reflective, abstract qualities as a measure of its seriousness. Attempting to distance themselves from (frequently) counter-hegemonic forms of African-American creativity such as rap, the neo-conservative musicians strive to achieve approval of the dominant white culture during a period of increased support for the arts in general. The funk music which forms the musical foundation of rap and which informed Fela's Afrobeat is based on the same structural principles as much traditional music of West Africa. Thus, implicit in the neo-conservative critique are the assumptions that one, seriousness of



Arkestra regularly included African percussionists and dancers and light shows. The Art Ensemble of Chicago also draws strongly on non-Western

performance traditions in their stage presentation. Thus, these musicians were at the forefront of attempt to devise a culturally-aware presentation

containing a deeper ritual significance than the local nightclub or the concert hall. These factors must be taken into serious consideration when constructing a composite, contemporary definition of 'jazz' which eludes simplistic criteria.

A number of prominent jazz musicians acknowledged the influence of Fela's music on their work. Trumpeter Bowie played with Fela and *Afrika '70* during an extended visit to Nigeria in 1977 and was featured as a soloist on a number of *Afrika '70* recordings including *Frustration*, *Dog Eat Dog* and *No Agreement*. Bowie in turn has recorded Fela's *Zombie* with his own group, the *Art Ensemble* of Chicago. Vibraphonist Roy Ayers has also toured and recorded with *Afrika '70* in Nigeria. Bowie and Ayers have made a number of guest appearances with Fela in the United States as has pianist Randy Weston. More recently, saxophonist Branford Marsalis has included samples of Fela's *Beast of No Nation* on his 1994 project *Buckshot Le Fonque*. It is thus clear that Fela's influence may be felt throughout various regions of jazz practice including the *avant garde*, neo-classicist and fusion movements. Meanwhile, Fela's music has been the primary catalyst for the development of a movement of younger Nigerian jazz-influenced players including his son Femi Anikulapo-Kuti, Bisade Ologunde, Kola Ogunkoya and Funsho Ogundipe.

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's ultimate success lies in his linkage of counter-hegemonic socio-political protest, communal pleasure and a deeply-rooted mood of musical profundity; all of these have characterized the essence of jazz during different phases of its development. Thus, my conclusion is that - in addition to its contribution to African popular music, African-American funk, and world political music - Fela's work represents a significant contribution to the development of jazz. **[GR]**