

# FINALLY ‘FELA!’ TAKES THE STAGE

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Written By ArtBurst Team  
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If ever a Broadway show was to be written about a man, Fela Kuti is that man. When he died in 1997, over a million people attended his funeral in Nigeria. But Fela lives on, in almost 70 albums that he leaves behind and his musical legacy as the creator of Afrobeat. Now there is a Broadway play that further immortalizes him, produced by iconic figures such as Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter and Will and Jada Pinkett Smith. Grammy-award-winning recording artist and former member of Destiny’s Child Michelle Williams joins the cast for the current U.S. tour at the Ziff Ballet Opera House at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts through March 24. Fela! The Musical is an inspirational tale of courage, passion and love based on the real life events of pioneer and agent provocateur Fela Kuti. It traces the creation of this new musical form of Afrobeat, which is an infusion of jazz, funk, salsa, calypso and indigenous African rhythms, harmonies and percussion. It is a unique, pounding, bright, joyful, and pulsating soundscape created to mirror the political terrain of the times of Nigerian Independence and post-colonial identity. Afrobeat can be considered a political art form, at least in the way Kuti created it. It is a music of confrontation. While the Western listener is confronted with battling sounds of brass and drum, call and response and myriad Yoruba chants or forms, the music is mapping historiographies of dictatorship, colonial oppression, and disenfranchisement. Another way Kuti performed his legacy and politics is in his unconventional lifestyle, reflected in the lyrics of his music. He founded a compound and recording studio where he lived with 27 wives. Influenced by James Brown, Miles Davis, and the politics of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and other international figures of Afrocentrism, Kuti’s lyrics were not only a rallying cry for the oppressed but a direct assault on the oppressor. Sadly, in 1977, during a government attack on the Kalakuta commune, military soldiers arrested and beat Kuti and the musicians, burned the commune to the ground (including his master tapes and instruments) and threw his 82-year-old mother out of an upstairs window, which proved to be fatal. Fela! features many of Kuti’s most captivating music and is directed and choreographed by Tony-award winner Bill T Jones, with a book by Jim Lewis and Bill T Jones. Fela! Runs through March 24 at the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami; at 8:00 p.m., on Saturday at 2:00 and 8:00 p.m., and Sunday at 2:00 and 7:30 p.m. Tickets range from \$26 to \$56.