



Nigel Williamson on how Fela's son is keeping the Afro-beat flame alive

FEMI KUTI

MUSICIAN INC

In the fickle, fashion-led world of pop culture, carrying a famous name is a heavy burden, as the offspring of John Lennon and Bob Marley have found. Yet the history of much of the world's music – certainly in Africa – is based on a long and deep tradition of passing on the torch from one generation to the next. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the death of Fela Kuti – surely a fitting moment finally to declare 'the king is dead, long live the king.' Seun Kuti, Fela's youngest son, currently leads his father's old band, Egypt 80, and is his half brother Femi's main rival as the keeper of the Afro-beat flame.

Throughout his career, Femi Kuti has had to suffer comparisons with his father. You can't fill the boots of a legend and Fela Kuti was not only an extraordinary and innovative musician but one of the giants of world music. Yet his long shadow should not obscure the fact that Femi Kuti has developed into a fine performer in his own right who has not only kept alive the flame of Afro-beat but brought his own unique creativity to bear in refreshing its funk-fuelled rhythms.

Born not in Lagos but in London in 1962

when his father was a student at the Royal Academy, Fela was a hard taskmaster who never showed his oldest son any signs of favouritism. After giving him a saxophone as a young boy, he then refused to give him any lessons. Yet by the age of 15, Femi's muscular playing had earned him a place in Fela's band, Egypt 80, on merit and he didn't have too long to wait for his first headlining opportunity, which came as a result of his father's life-long battle with the Nigerian authorities. Booked in 1985 to play at the Hollywood Bowl with his band, Fela failed to make it on to the plane after he was arrested at Lagos airport on dubious charges of illegally exporting currency. Femi stepped forward to lead the band – and did so, by all accounts, with considerable aplomb.

Together with keyboard player Dele Sosimi, he left Fela's band the following year and formed Positive Force, resulting in a rift between father and son that was to last several years. Femi's debut album with the band, *No Cause for Alarm*, was recorded in Lagos and released on Polygram Nigeria in 1987. Now a collector's item, its mix of funk, soul and jazz, driven in the best Afro-beat tradition by

thundering percussion and blazing horns, was raw and rough-edged but proved that he could stand on his own two feet.

His first European tour with Positive Force followed in 1988 and a second album, *Mind Your Own Business*, appeared in 1991 on Mélodie. Dogged by unflattering comparisons with his father, the album sold poorly. After regrouping, four years later, Femi made his first US tour culminating in an acclaimed appearance at the Summer Stage in New York's Central Park in July 1995. The tour coincided with the release of his third album, *Femi Kuti*, on Tabu Records, a subsidiary of Motown. It earned decent reviews across Europe and the US but just as importantly won him six awards at Nigeria's Fame Music Awards, including artist of the year and led to a rapprochement with his father, who finally admitted that his son had what it takes. Yet Femi remains resentful of what he sees as his father's lack of support early in his career. "He made me suffer all my life," he complained as recently as 2005. "As a boy I picked up a saxophone and said 'teach me'. He said 'go and teach yourself'. But when I look at his life I know what he

"[Fela] taught me to be individual and to do things my own way."

went through, so it's very hard for me to hate him. He taught me to be individual and to do things my own way."

That individuality was certainly evident on his next album, *Shoki Shoki*, on the French label Barclay in 1998, the year after Fela's death. The sound drew heavily on the funk-jazz prototype of Fela's Afro-beat but added fresh flavours drawn from contemporary R&B and dance music and tightened up Fela's sprawling jams into more focused five or six minute songs. It was followed three years later by *Fight To Win*, which went further down the road of incorporating contemporary black American influences into the mix with the presence of hip-hop collaborators such as Mos Def and Common.

Unfortunately, it was his last album for Barclay, which as part of the Universal group had also afforded him considerable international exposure. "They sacked me because I sacked my French manager, and they were annoyed by an African sacking a Frenchman," according to Femi. Since then there has only been the *Live At The Shrine* album, recorded in 2004 at the club in Lagos which remains the centre of his operations and where he continues to play every Sunday night when he's not on tour. Until recently it was also the headquarters of his Movement Against Second Slavery campaign, which helped to fund a variety of cultural, social and educational projects but which he recently disbanded.

Meanwhile, as we wait for his first new studio album in six years, the Kuti tradition continues and Femi's own son now plays alongside him in Positive Force. "The one thing I learned from my father was to be true to yourself," he says. "And that's the advice I've given him." ●



You can hear the tracks 'Fight to Win' and 'Beng Beng Beng' on this issue's podcast



Femi Kuti getting the full Positive Force backing

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Femi Kuti (Tabu/Motown, 1995)
All of the trademarks of Femi's later albums are in place here as he instils his father's sprawling sound into something cleaner and more succinct on outstanding tracks such as 'Wonder Wonder' and 'Survival'.



Shoki Shoki (Barclay/Polygram, 1998)
The album that disproved the theory Femi was just a pale imitation of his father as he gives the familiar Afro-beat grooves an urgent, contemporary dancefloor feel on tracks such as 'Truth Don Die', 'Beng Beng Beng' and 'Blackman Know Yourself'.



Fight To Win (Barclay/Polygram, 2001)
More innovations as guest appearances by American hip-hop and R&B artists Mos Def, Common and Jaguar Wright are perfectly integrated into Femi's polyrhythmic funk. Highlights include the title-track, 'Do Your Best' and 'Traitors of Africa'.



Femi Kuti - Live at the Shrine Deluxe Edition (Universal, 2004)
First released as a CD only, it's more than worth shelling out the extra cash for the deluxe edition which features an in-concert DVD of a typically thrilling Sunday night performance at Femi's club in downtown Lagos.

...AVOIDED



Best Of Femi Kuti (Wrasse, 2005)
A completely gratuitous collection compiled exclusively from his two Barclays albums, with nothing from his 1989 debut or his 1995 Motown release, despite the fact that they're owned by the same parent company, Universal. An opportunity missed: particularly as *No Cause For Alarm* is now so rare it's being advertised on the internet at £95 for a vinyl copy.

...COMPILATION



Femi Kuti - The Definitive Collection (Wrasse, 2007)
If you want a compilation, go for the recent *Definitive Collection*, which includes the best of his two Barclay albums, a brace of tracks from his 1995 album and a duet with Rachid Taha, as well as a second disc of remixes. Reviewed in the next issue.

LIKE FEMI KUTI, THEN TRY... NU AFROBEAT EXPERIENCE

(Shanachie, 2002)



The Kuti tribe continues to dominate Afro-beat but there are plenty of other bands keeping Fela's legacy alive. This 11-track compilation offers an excellent overview and includes fine tracks by several former Fela alumni, including Tony Allen and Ayetoro, whose 'Revenge of the Flying Monkeys' is one of the great Afro-beat classics of all time.