

Review

Collins, John. 2015. *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press. ISBN 978-0819575395 (pbk). 344 pp.

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Originally published in 2009 by the Dutch Royal Tropical Museum, this updated edition of *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* is a welcome addition to what has become a sizable body of literature on arguably the most important sub-Saharan African musician of the last thirty years of the twentieth century, Fela Anikulapo Kuti. Born in Nigeria, Fela (as he is universally referred to) founded the genre Afrobeat and, after a visit to the United States in 1969, became increasingly militant. He wrote and performed extended compositions that challenged and often excoriated government officials, the Nigerian army and the heads of multinational corporations in songs such as 'Zombie', 'Coffin for Head of State', 'Confusion' and 'Expensive Shit'. Flouting authority and mainstream mores to a degree that most popular musicians just play at, Fela was arrested and jailed numerous times (to the point where in the mid-1980s Amnesty International labelled him officially a 'prisoner of conscience') and had his Kalakuta compound in Lagos stormed by the army and/or local police at which time several of his wives were sexually assaulted and his mother was thrown over a second-storey balcony to her death.

Fela's biography, politics and music have been explored in eight previous books, the most notable being Carlos Moore's 1982 authorized biography *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*, Michael Veal's 2002 tome *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon* and Tejumola Olaniyan's 2004 book *Arrest the Music! Fela and his Rebel Art and Politics*. By necessity, there is some duplication with material found in many of these earlier works, but Collins's book is unique in that it is largely rooted in his personal encounters with Fela over a period of nine years. Collins first saw Fela perform at the University of Ghana when Collins was a student there in 1972, and performed in his own band at Fela's famed Shrine Club in Lagos in 1974. After a week of performances, Fela helped Collins's band to record in Lagos. A year later, Collins conducted a formal interview with Fela and met him several more times in 1976 before being hired by Fela in January 1977 to spend a month acting in Fela's

never released film *The Black President*. Several more meetings ensued in 1978, with Collins's last encounter with Fela occurring in Amsterdam in 1981.

The working title of *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* was originally *Fela Through Ghanaian Eyes* and the heart of the book stems from a diary that Collins kept during the shooting of *The Black President*. It is this approach that makes *Kalakuta Notes* a unique and valuable addition to the literature on Fela. Collins's book is rife with anecdotes derived from lived encounters with Fela that would simply be inaccessible to most biographers. Collins complements his own experiences and memories with interviews he conducted with Ghanaian concert promoters, lawyers and musicians who knew and/or worked with Fela as well as a number of Nigerian musicians who either played in Fela's band or in other ways had notable encounters with Fela.

Much of the book is made up of extended quotes from these interviews, several extended passages consisting of Collins's questions and his interviewee's answers printed virtually verbatim. Six of the book's nineteen chapters are entirely made up of interview transcripts. As such, while the first two sections of the book follow a historical chronology, it is not a typical biography. Instead it is filled with personal opinions, observations and stories that provide much insight into Fela's personality, psyche, ideology and musical approach while eschewing a more typical 'life and times' approach of discussing recordings, tours and business deals in chronological order.

The resulting work gives the reader a strong sense of the constant interchange between Ghanaian and Nigerian musicians (even though the two countries are separated by Togo and Benin, neither of the latter two nations have produced popular musicians of anywhere near the importance of those produced by Ghana or Nigeria and there seems to have been little interaction between musicians from Togo or Benin with the rich musical scenes in Ghana and Nigeria). The reader also gets a deep, nuanced sense of Fela's important relationship with Ghana and Ghanaian musicians in the earliest part of his career and the transformation of Fela as a person over time.

Due to the way the book has been written, there is some needless repetition and the last half of the book consists of nine isolated chapters that in some ways function more as appendices than integral parts of a larger narrative. Nonetheless, much of what is found in these chapters, while feeling disconnected from the larger work, provides additional and valuable insights into Fela the person and musician.

In the final analysis, *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* is a bit of an odd duck, nearly functioning as an anthology consisting of a diary, somewhat random isolated interviews, a chapter on early Afro-fusion pioneers, and two final chapters entitled 'After-

thoughts and Updates' and 'Felabrations at Home and Abroad'. New to this edition is the latter chapter and the introduction has been somewhat expanded as well. I would not recommend *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* as an entry point for those just beginning to explore the fascinating life and extraordinary music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, but for those who have already digested the basic works, this is a wonderful read that will certainly provide insights not available elsewhere.