

# **The Music and Activism of Fela Kuti: A Selective Annotated Bibliography**

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This is a selective annotated bibliography concerning the music and activism of Fela Kuti, a Nigerian saxophonist, composer, bandleader, activist, philosopher, and historical figure. His lyrics are known for speaking out against oppression and corruption in the Nigerian government in the late 20th century, which garnered widespread popularity and notoriety. Additionally, Fela is credited with fostering the musical style "Afrobeat." Sources pertaining to Fela's musical development, examples of his political ideology and movements, and how his activism influenced his music are included. Most sources are also biographical, as it is agreed upon by scholars to be inseparable from his music and activism. In order to avoid confusion between Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, his mother Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti, and his son Femi Kuti, this bibliography will refer to these figures by first name rather than last name. This is customary in most of the sources included.

In the annotations, references are made to specific events in Fela's life that shaped his politics and music. The primary example is the raid of February 1977, when Nigerian military stormed Fela's home with the intent to arrest him. Fela sustained heavy injuries, many of his wives were assaulted, and his mother died from injuries sustained in the attack. This is often marked as a turning point in Fela's politics, music, and attitude toward Nigerian military leaders. References are also made to his arrest in 1984. En route to Los Angeles, Fela was stopped and searched at the airport in Lagos. When officials found £16,000 (\$19,820) on his person, they prevented him from boarding the plane and charged him with smuggling currency. During court testimony, Fela stated that he claimed the money on an official document, but the paperwork had been lost by officials. He also accused an official of demanding a bribe. Fela was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but was released in 1986 after a worldwide public outcry. Many sources pertain to Fela's attitude shift while in prison: his music became much more complex, he divorced all 27 of his wives, and his political ideologies intensified.

I had a cursory understanding of Fela's pervasive influence before beginning this project, but investigating these sources has shown me the full extent of Fela as a cultural, political, and musical phenomenon. He has influenced writers, leaders, and musicians around the world. Movies, documentaries, Broadway productions, and tribute bands concerning Fela's life and music have all emerged since his death in 1997. It seems that interest in Fela Anikulapo-Kuti will only intensify in years to come. The preliminary research done for this project is also personally valuable, as I hope to use it as part of a future dissertation on political dissidence in music.

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### I. Books, Reference Books, and Book Chapters

1. Anikulapo-Kuti, F., (2004). Fela Anikupalo-Kuti. In H. Bardowitz (Ed.), *Noise of the world: Non-western musicians in their own words* (pp. 167-172). New York, NY: Soft Skull Press.

In this work, Bardowitz compiles writings from dozens of artists from all over the world. Fela Kuti's contribution comes from just after his prison sentence, a transitive time in his life. Fela chronicles his time in prison, and how his views changed during his quiet contemplations. He also speaks about the next stage of his musical career, and what he hopes to achieve through his music. Bardowitz's collection includes a table of contents.

2. Collins, J., Eyre, B., & Graham, R. (2015). *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* (2nd ed.). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Originally published in Amsterdam, John Collins provides a first-hand journalistic account of several points in Fela's life and career. Collins assisted Fela with filming his unreleased documentary, *Black President*. Collins was also a journalist for American Music, West Africa, Popular Music, and several other publications. Many of his interviews and accounts from his various articles appear in this work. Collins provides the typical biography and family history, but the centerpiece of Collin's work is the diary of his time in Kalakuta. He was living with Fela during the military raids of 1974 and 1977. He also notes how often Fela travelled to Ghana to give lectures at the University and at various rallies. Collins also interviewed several musicians close to Fela during his life. The last section of the book is six interviews with musicians discussing the lasting impression of Fela Kuti after his death in 1997. This work also includes a forward by Banning Eyre, a chronology, a bibliography, and a discography compiled by Ronnie Graham. The appendix contains a score reduction of Fela's composition "Shuffering and Shmiling."

3. Grass, R. F. (2009). Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: The afrobeat rebel. In *Great spirits: Portraits of life-changing world music artists* (pp. 63-95). Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi.

*Great Spirits* is a collection of accounts, interviews, and writings of several renown Black artists written by Grass. In addition to Fela Kuti, essays on Nina Simone, Sun Ra, Bob Marley, and several others are included. Grass was a journalist, a producer, and a musician who toured with Fela for several years. Grass provides a descriptive account of his experience seeing Fela at the Afrikan Shrine in Lagos, and offers insights from his observations into Fela's music, life, and politics. This chapter serves as a compendium of Grass's journalistic accounts of Fela throughout the years, as several of his articles are cited and quoted. This work includes a bibliography for each chapter.

4. Idowu, M. K. (1986). *Fela: Why blackman carry shit*. Ikeja, Nigeria: Opinion Media Limited.

#### (ILL Item)

Idowu provides a thorough family history and biography of Fela, interspersed with quotes from interviews, newspaper headlines, and in one instance an entire article from a Berlin newspaper. Idowu's book is a great resource for information about the 1977 World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (translated and abbreviated to FESTAC), which Fela helped produce but later publicly denounced. Chapter 8 is a full transcription of one of Fela's lectures at the University of Ife in Nigeria. The lecture, titled "Essence of Culture in Development," goes through a revisionist history of the slave trade, the history of Egypt, and an account of the kingdom of Benin. This is a rare glimpse into the true sophistication and intelligence of Fela Kuti, not often seen in his music alone. The book concludes with two articles from *Newswatch*: one documenting Fela's imprisonment, the other documenting his release two years later.

5. Idowu, M. K. (2002). *Fela, le combattant [Fela, the fighter]*. Bordeaux, France: Le Castor Astral.

**(ILL Item)**

Subsequent editions of this work have been translated into English from its original French by Jacqueline Grandchamp-Thiam. While this work provides much of the same biographical and lyrical information as other sources on this list, it is significant in documenting Fela's lectures at Universities in Ghana and Nigeria in the 1980s (Chapter 7). According to the text, professors from these schools were quite impressed with how intelligent and articulate Fela was with students, and his uncanny ability to hold their attention for hours at a time. This book contains a discography and glossary. Note that the table of contents is located at the end of the book.

6. Kutí, F. (2006). In C. Larkin (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of popular music* (4th ed). Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/epm/15574>

Fela's entry in the Encyclopedia of Popular Music provides basic biographical information, and some notes regarding his political and social views. A bibliography, videography, filmography, and full discography are included. There has been a resurgence of interest in Fela over the past 20 years, and unfortunately this article has not been updated since 2006. Several important publications, including the Broadway musical written about his life, are not mentioned.

7. Moore, C. (S. Moore, Trans.). (1982). *Fela, Fela: This bitch of a life* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Allison & Busby Limited.

Originally published in Paris, France under the title "Fela, Fela, - cette putain de vie" [Fela, Fela, - this motherfucking life], this edition is translated from French by Shawna Moore. Carlos Moore is the authorized biographer of Fela Kutí, and this monograph is the transcribed account from Fela himself regarding his life, music, political views, and religious views. The work includes interviews Moore conducted with J.K. Brainah, Remi Kutí, Sandra Isidore, and 14 of his 27 wives. The wives' interviews are a particularly informative account of the 1977 Kalakuta raid. Due to its early publication date, this book does not cover Fela's life and career from 1982 until his death in 1997. This edition includes an insert describing various deities in the Yoruba religion, of which Fela became a devout follower later in life. A full discography is also included.

8. Olaniyan, T. (2004). *Arrest the music!: Fela and his rebel art and politics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Olaniyan provides a thorough account of Fela's influence on Nigerian politics. The book goes through several of Fela's lyrics, provides English translations, and gives an analysis of the content and the inspiration behind the music. Olaniyan is a native Nigerian, and has a unique insight into how common Nigerians viewed and reacted to Fela's music. He also provides several first-hand accounts of events in Fela's life. This work contains a bibliography, discography, a song index, and a general index.

9. Olorunyomi, S. (2002). *Afrobeat!: Fela and the imagined continent*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

**(ILL Item)**

Olorunyomi covers several topics, including the political context and ideology of Fela (chapters 1 and 2), the performance practice of Afrobeat (chapters 3 and 5), and the resounding influence of Fela Kutí and the music he pioneered (chapters 4 and 6). Olorunyomi's book serves as a comprehensive account of the Young African Pioneers, the youth movement that Fela started in the late 70s. At the end of this work, Olorunyomi includes excerpts from the manifesto of the Movement of the People, Fela's party from his unlaunched presidential campaign. The book also contains a glossary, discography, timeline of events, index, and photo gallery.

10. Schoonmaker, T. (2003). *Black president: The art and legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti*. New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

**(ILL Item)**

*Black President* is supplemental material for the contemporary art exhibition inspired by Fela Kuti that Schoonmaker curated, which was featured at museums in New York, San Francisco, and London from 2003-2004. Similar to its sister work, *Fela: From West Africa to West Broadway* (see entry no. 11), this is a collection of essays, critiques, and interviews surrounding Fela Kuti. Notable chapters include Yomi Durotoye's "The Political Context of Fela's Activism," which documents Fela's music over the backdrop of Nigerian political turmoil. Vivien Goldman's article "The Rascal Republic Takes on the World" provides an in-depth analysis of Fela's inspiration behind "ITT-International Thief Thief." An interview with Femi Kuti is also included, where he discusses his work with UNICEF fighting AIDS in Africa. This collected work also contains documentary images of Fela's life, as well as a catalogue of the art gallery pieces. Each artist also provides their biography and a statement on how Fela has inspired them. This work contains a bibliography.

11. Schoonmaker, T. (2003). *Fela: From West Africa to west Broadway*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Schoonmaker compiles essays, interviews, articles, and accounts surrounding Fela's life, music, and political activism. The original location of each work is provided at the end of each chapter. Many authors included in this bibliography provide essays for this collection, such as Mabinuori Kayode Idowu and Sola Olorunyomi. An excerpt of *Kalakuta Notes* by John Collins is also included in this collection (see entry no. 2). Yomi Durotoye's article "Fela's Resistance of Domination" is a particularly fine resource for researching Fela's activism. This collection also contains two inserts of candid photos of Fela, as well as a catalog of album art designed by Fela's longtime artist Ghariokwu Lemi.

12. Veal, M. E. (2000). *Fela: The Life and times of an African musical icon*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

**(ILL Item)**

Michael Veal is a Professor of Ethnomusicology at Yale, and a musician who shared the stage with Fela for a short time. Veal's book presents Fela's biography, political ideology, and relationships with political leaders in a clear and concise way. According to a review of the book by John Fenn in the *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology*, Veal also "contextualizes the many images, moods, and creative environment of post-independence Nigeria." Veal gives a short history of Nigeria, and the various regime changes during Fela's career. The work is interspersed with lyrical analyzation, quotes from Carlos Moore's book (see entry no. 7), and several local newspaper articles. This work contains a full personnel list of all of Fela's backing bands, a discography, and an index. The bibliography of Veal's book would be quite useful for locating articles concerning Fela's career from Nigerian newspapers.

John Fenn's review can be found here:

Fenn, J.B. (2006). [Review of Veal, Michael. *Fela: The life and times of an African musical icon*.]. *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology*, 50(1), 142-144. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20174428>

## **II. Dissertations & Theses**

13. Dosunmu, O. A. (2010). *Afrobeat, Fela, and beyond: Scenes, style, and ideology* (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global. (Order No. 3447309)

Dosunmu provides a thorough analysis of the aesthetics and performance practices of Afrobeat. This dissertation also discusses popular music in Lagos, currently active Afrobeat bands, and a chapter on Fela's political ideology. Several accounts from Dosunmu's field work in Lagos and New York City are interspersed throughout the dissertation. The author also includes a transcription of Fela's "Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense," in order to discuss stylistic conventions and Fela's evolution as a composer after his jail sentence. This work contains an appendix of song lyrics as well as a bibliography.

14. Fairfax, F. T. (1993). *Fela, the afrobeat king: Popular music and cultural revitalization in west Africa* (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global. (Order No. 9409686)

*The Afrobeat King* is the definitive dissertation on Fela Kuti, referenced in several books and articles in this bibliography. This work covers African music, the history of Nigeria, Nigerian pop music, Afrobeat as a genre, the prevalent religions of Nigeria, Fela's political movements, and biographical information. Chapters 8-10 discuss Fela's political activism, government reactions, the 1977 raid, and Fela's presidential run. This dissertation contains a thorough bibliography, with a separate section for interviews and newspaper articles.

15. O'Neal, S. T. (2016). *The soundscape of diaspora and anti-colonialism: Historical significance and theory* (Master's Thesis). Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations and Theses Global. (Order No. 10112653)

O'Neal's dissertation uses Fela's activism to discuss issues with colonial and postcolonial society. Lyrical analysis is provided for Fela's "Colonial Mentality," "Yellow Fever," "Shuffering and Shmiling," "Why Blackmen Dey Suffer," and "Gentleman." O'Neal also provides the full history of British colonization in Nigeria. Compared to Fairfax and Dosunmu, this dissertation is not a strong resource for Fela Kuti's biography, but it offers a unique perspective into Fela's activism and the cultural context of his political critique.

### III. Periodicals

16. Grass, R. F. (1986, February). Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: The art of an afrobeat rebel. *The Drama Review*, 30, 131-148. doi:10.2307/1145717.

While Fela was imprisoned on currency smuggling charges, Randall Grass wrote a series of articles to several different magazines and journals calling for his release. Grass provides an articulate account of Fela's life, music, and events that shaped his political persona. This article contains several pictures of the artist, his band, and album art. Grass includes appendices of lyrics from "Gentleman," "Confusion," and "VIP." *The Drama Review* followed up with Grass' article in their next publication: Fela released from prison. (1986, May). *The Drama Review*, 30, 176. doi: 10.2307/1145741.

17. Labinjoh, J. (1982, September). Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: Protest music and social processes in Nigeria. *Journal of Black Studies*, 13, 119-134. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783979>

Labinjoh offers a unique sociological perspective on the political activism of Fela Kuti. The author spent several days in Nigeria recording interviews with Fela, and uses his life history as a form of research methodology. Labinjoh speaks eloquently on lower class Nigerians and Fela's influence on their culture, chronicling the recent history of Nigeria's post-colonial politics and how Fela's Afrikan Shrine became a social hub of lower-class identity. Notes and references are included in the work.

18. Miller, J. (1985, July 15). Rocking all the way to jail. *Newsweek*, pp. 67.

Miller describes Fela's imprisonment, provides information about recent album releases, and gives background info on the aesthetics of Afrobeat. The article exhibits signs of cultural bias when discussing Fela's religious practices, referring to it as "vaudeville voodoo." Despite his seemingly low opinion of Fela, the author concedes his musical and political impact, noting the "furious zeal of his convictions, his defiance, and physical courage."

19. Olatunji, M. (2007, August 1). Yabis: A phenomenon in the contemporary Nigerian music. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 1(9), pp. 26-46.

*Yabis* discusses the methods Fela used to convey his political message. Olatunji defines the Yoruban word *Yabis* as “poking fun,” though Fela surely stretches that definition in his works. Several lyric analyses are used to showcase Fela calling out specific members of the Nigerian political establishment and attempting to expose wrongdoings. Olatunji also discusses Fela’s tactical use of pidgin English to reach a worldwide audience. The section “Impact of *Yabis* Music in Nigeria” is a worthy resource for Fela’s political activism, both within and outside of his music.

20. Radical with a cause: An interview with the legendary Fela. (1989, February 20). *West Africa*, pp.272.

In this short interview, published three years after his release from prison, Fela expresses his uncompromising political ideologies. It is easy to discern Fela’s ability to articulate his philosophy and wishes for the lower classes of Africa. He also endorses Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso at the time. The article features a black and white photo of Fela singing.

21. Shoreken, S. (2009, Spring). Fela’s foundation: Examining the revolutionary songs of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Abeokuta market women’s movement in 1940s western Nigeria. *Black Music Research Journal*, 29(1), 127-144. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20640673>

When exploring Fela’s influences, several names appear repeatedly. Moore, Grass, and Collins all agree that Fela’s commanding stage presence was inspired by James Brown, his music by Miles Davis, and his politics by The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Shoreken argues that Fela’s mother, Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti, played a much larger role in shaping Fela’s ideologies. Shoreken goes on to draw comparisons between Fela’s lyrics and a book of protest songs penned by Fumilayo.

22. Stanovsky, D. (1998). Fela and his wives: The import of a postcolonial masculinity. *Jouvert*. Retrieved from <http://english.chass.ncsu.edu>

Stanovsky poses some interesting and uncomfortable questions in this article. Specifically, why western media concentrates so heavily on Fela’s 27 wives, his dress (or lack thereof), and his boisterous personality. Stanovsky argues that Fela fit the image of the Western listener’s internalized idea of African men. The author goes on to claim that Fela would not have achieved widespread popularity without fulfilling racist and sexist tendencies in Western media. Time magazine’s obituary of Fela is used as a primary example of how Western media portrayed Fela. This article is included in this bibliography as an example of Fela’s “inadvertent activism,” similar to how his death of AIDS raised awareness of the syndrome (see entry no. 30). Most scholars agree upon Fela’s misogyny, even if they gloss over or dodge that aspect of his life in their writings. Stanovsky sees Fela’s misogyny as an opportunity to view our own biases toward African men’s actions and behavior. While Fela’s views on women are not a pillar of his activism, his life and actions do incite a dialogue about how we all view women, and why many fans of Fela are complacent in his misogyny.

23. Tannenbaum, R. (1985, May). Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: Nigeria’s fabled “black president” makes music his weapon. *Musician*, 79, 23-30. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/964129264>

Tannenbaum discusses Fela’s social influence, both in Nigeria and beyond. Written during Fela’s jail sentence, the author goes through Fela’s biography and events that shaped his political ideology. Tannenbaum refers to the Nigerian government’s reactions to Fela’s music as “the ultimate accolade” to the power and impact of his message. The article also contains interviews with Lester Bowie and Victor Tieu, who both shared the stage with Fela. The last six paragraphs of this article are a particularly moving account of Fela’s politics in his music, and how the world reacted to his prison sentence.

#### IV. Recordings

24. Anikulapo-Kuti, F. (2010). *Coffin for head of state* [CD]. New York, NY: Knitting Factory Records.

This album is notable for its cover art, which is a collage of newspaper articles surrounding the 1977 raid on Fela's home. Fela's mother, Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti, died of her injuries sustained during the raid, and obituaries and funeral photos are also included in the collage. The title refers to his protest after the raid, when he placed his mother's coffin at the entrance of the Nigerian army barracks. This album was originally released in 1980 by Mercury records. Knitting Factory's release does not remove any of the original album collage, so notes on both of the pieces featured are provided in a paper insert. The author of these annotations is uncredited, but likely to be Mabinuori Kayode Idowu based on other Knitting Factory releases of Fela's work.

25. Anikulapo-Kuti, F. (2000). *The best best of Fela Kuti* [CD]. Universal City, CA: MCA Records.

*Best best* is a compilation CD featuring twelve of Fela's pieces recorded throughout his career. The liner notes include a well-written biography by Jacqueline Grandchamp-Thiam, and a stirring obituary written by Fela's former manager Rikki Stein. The true highlight of this source are the track annotations written by Michael Veal, professor of Ethnomusicology at Yale. Veal provides background information about each piece's political and social message, reaction, and inspiration.

26. Anikulapo-Kuti, F. (2001). *Zombie* [CD]. New York, NY: Knitting Factory Records.

Arguably Fela's most influential work, *Zombie* is a scathing critique of the Nigerian military. It is repeatedly referenced as a contributing factor in the Nigerian military's 1977 raid on Fela's home. The piece's popularity in Ghana also coincided with his exile from the country. Knitting Factory's redistribution of this album includes the original 1977 album artwork, track listing, and lyrics. Descriptive annotations of each track are also provided by Mabinuori Kayode Idowu, author of *Fela: Why Blackman Carry Shit* (see entry no. 4) and *La Combattant* (entry no. 5). Knitting Factory also includes their catalog of Fela's albums on the CD jacket, which can serve as a makeshift thematic catalog for Fela's body of work.

#### V. Videos

27. Gulick, J. (Producer), & Gibney, A. (Director). (2014). *Finding Fela!*. United States: Jigsaw Productions.

This two-hour documentary is structured around the rehearsals and premiere of the 2010 Broadway musical *Fela!*. As each scene or rehearsal clip is presented, background information and interviews with Carlos Moore, Rikki Stein, Questlove, Lemi Ghariokwu, Paul McCartney, and Sandra Isidore are provided. This documentary also serves as a compilation of past documentaries featuring Fela Kuti, as it contains clips from *Kokombe: The Nigerian Pop Music Scene* (1980), *Music is the Weapon* (1982), his Live in Berlin and Live in Glastonbury performances, and the BBC Special *Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense* (1988). This documentary also contains rare footage of Fela's public funeral.

28. Schmidt, G. (Producer), & Stein, R. (Executive Producer). (2009). *A Slice of Fela*. USA: Knitting Factory Entertainment Production. In F. Anikulapo-Kuti, *Fela: The best of the black president: Deluxe edition* [CD Box Set]. New York, NY: Knitting Factory Records.

*A Slice of Fela* is a compilation of video interviews and performances, included in a CD box set of Fela Kuti selections. An introduction for each video segment is given by Sahr Ngaujah, who played Fela Kuti in the 2010 Broadway Production *Fela!*. Featured videos include *Music is the Weapon* (1982), a selection from his Berlin Jazz Festival performance, and the BBC documentary *Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense* (1988). Unlike *Finding Fela!*, these videos are provided in full. This DVD compilation is also remarkable for being the announcement of Fela.net, also included in this bibliography.

## VI. Websites

29. Fela.net, Inc. (2017, November 24). *Fela.net*. Retrieved from <http://www.fela.net>.

This website is a tribute to everything related to Fela Kuti's life, music, politics, career, and influence. It was launched in preparation of *Fela!*, the 2010 Broadway production chronicling Fela's life and music. The site features a biography written by Carlos Moore (see entry no. 7), and Rikki Stein's stirring obituary (see entry no. 25). A weblog of Fela-related news can be found here, as well as external links to a Youtube channel, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Spotify profile, all dedicated to Fela Kuti. This website also contains a discography, photo gallery, and merchandise store.

30. Kuti, F. (2000, November 10). *Commentary: Speaking out against AIDS*. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.org/pon00/mysong/htm>

This is a transcript of a speech Fela's son Femi Kuti gave at the UNICEF conference, "The Progress of Nations 2000." Femi recounts his father's death of AIDS in 1997, and establishes his commitment to raising awareness of the syndrome in Africa. Before Fela's death, AIDS was a taboo subject among Nigerians. While Fela himself never sung or spoke about AIDS awareness, his death started the discussion of how to combat the syndrome in Africa. Similar to Stanovsky's article on Fela's misogyny (see entry no. 22), this is an example of Fela's "inadvertent activism." The events of his life, rather than his own words and politics, incited discussions on social issues. Three years later, Femi became a special representative for African AIDS awareness with UNICEF, documented in the following article:

*UNICEF: Femi Kuti is UNICEF's newest special representative*. (2003, November 10). Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.org/newsline/02pr34femi.htm>