



*Fela: Kalakuta Notes* by John Collins. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015, pp.344, ISBN 978-0-8195-7539-5; reviewed by Jonathan T. Reynolds (reynoljo@nku.edu), Professor, Department of History and Geography, Northern Kentucky University.

There are few 20<sup>th</sup> Century musicians more appealing and complicated than Fela Kuti (1938-1997: Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, also known as Fela Anikulapo Kuti). Fela was not only a skilled musician and performer, but also a band leader, club owner, stage producer, and visual artist. He did not just perform. He made music. He was not simply an African artist, but was also deeply cosmopolitan – bridging and building upon complex musical currents that flowed across oceans and centuries, out of and into Africa. And he was, of course, a rebel, a thorn in the side of his mother, and then in that of a succession of Nigerian governments.

Fela's charisma and influence, however, have also colored his legacy. As is all too often the case with heroic figures, much of his humanity has been stripped away. Often, biographies and other works on Fela have fallen prey to the "Great Man" school of scholarship, and some even veer into the territory of hagiography. It is no small irony that Fela now has an eponymous Broadway Musical, and that the Kalakuta Republic has become a museum funded in part by the Lagos government.

Nonetheless, it is in producing a profoundly human biography of Fela that John Collins' contribution *Kalakuta Notes* is a welcome contribution to our understanding of all that made Fela such an influential and enigmatic figure. And indeed, Collins is uniquely well placed to write a biography which places Fela in the context of not only a time and place, but also in the context of his friends, collaborators, and contemporaries. Collins is not only one of the foremost scholars of West African popular music, but is himself a talented musician and producer and was a friend and colleague of Kuti for decades. There is likely no one who knows the recent history of African music more than Collins, and his deep knowledge and understanding of the subject (not always the same thing) is the perfect context for a much more complete and contextualized biography of Fela Kuti.

Part of the charm of this work is that it does not try too hard to be academic. Collins presents the reader, in Part One and Part Two of the book, with a fairly straightforward chronological narrative of Fela's life and work. Expected topics, such as his early education, the creation, of Afrobeat, and collisions with the Nigerian government are covered in expected detail. Here we learn about his early life among his well-educated family, the beginnings of his musical career, and his education in Britain, his political awakenings in the US and Nigeria, and his rise to stardom.

Additional richness comes in the form of brief interviews with Fela's fellow musicians, such as members of his bands and his fellow band leaders, such as the Ghanaian High Life star, Joe Mensah. Such interviews provide insights into Fela's personality and musical influences not found elsewhere, and as such, *Kalakuta Notes* functions both as a biography of Fela and as a history of the times and music of which he was so much a part.

In the final section of the book, Part Three, Collins expands upon the sorts of interviews used to enrich the first two sections, and presents six more detailed interviews with Fela's fellow musicians and one interview with Fela himself. These interviews are rich with insights and detail not found in other biographies of Fela or works on the history of West African music. He then wraps the book up with an examination of Fela's legacy and the global expansion of Afrobeat in recent years. In so doing, he not only enriches our understanding of Fela, but also highlights just how many musical innovators from this era are worthy of study and even their own biographies.

Collins' work also adds a welcome degree of complexity to our understanding of the incredibly rich and cosmopolitan musical landscape of West Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. In particular, the reader gets to see Fela's development as a musician as he experiences not only other west African musical styles (such as Highlife and Palm Wine) through contact with musicians from Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia, but also Funk, Soul, and Rock and Roll from the Europe and America. Such information helps break down simplified notions of African music as "indigenous" and highlights that culture, far from being fixed, is always in motion. Indeed, the rise of Fela and Afrobeat highlight the fact that West Africans are among the world's most eager cultural epicureans -- embracing and adapting musical forms in creative and wondrous ways. Hence, *Fela: Kalakuta Notes* is an excellent and perhaps unassumingly rich contribution to our understanding of not only Fela Kuti, but also of the rich and ever-changing world of West African popular music.