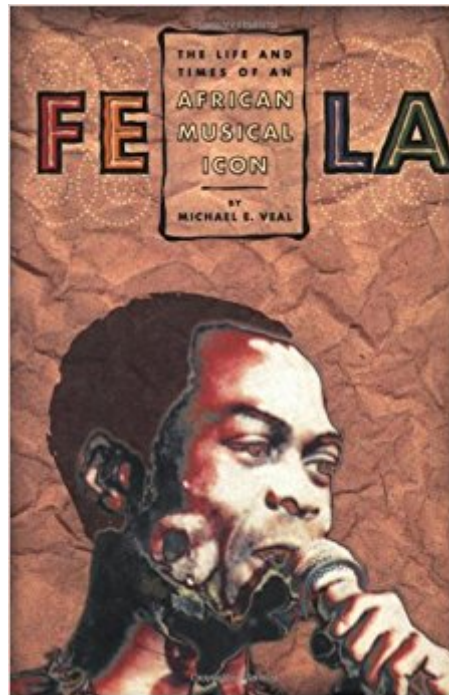




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# Fela: The Life And Times Of An African Musical Icon



## Synopsis

A study of Nigerian musician and political critic Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. It demonstrates that over three decades Fela synthesized a unique musical language while also clearing a space for popular political dissent and a type of counter-cultural expression rarely seen in West Africa.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Temple University Press (May 17, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1566397650

ISBN-13: 978-1566397650

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.8 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #521,887 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Dance](#) #82 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Ethnic & International > International](#) #134 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Jazz](#)

## Customer Reviews

Raucous, uninhibited and proud, Fela was one of Africa's most intriguing personalities, for his controversial public persona as much as for his music. It's difficult to say for what Fela, born Olufela Olusegun Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, was best known: his band publicized Afropop in the 1980s; he repeatedly spoke out against unfair politics in Africa and abroad; his life was abundant with drugs and sex. This exhaustive and objective profile, written by a Yale ethnomusicology professor, examines the Nigerian superstar's life and work from 1938 to his death in 1997. Veal traces Fela's roots to the diverse town of Abeokuta, noting the musical influences left by family and community members there. Following a typically mischievous childhood, Fela pursued an education at Trinity College of Music in London. Soon he and his orchestra were touring the U.S. under the name Nigeria 70, developing the new sound of Afropop. Although the tour was not a popular breakthrough, their subsequent return to Nigeria placed them on the budding African music stage. The book goes on to survey Fela's life at home and worldwide, detailing his imprisonment and physical abuse, his performances, his listeners' reactions and his compositions. Fela covered political corruption, mysticism, frustration with Western views on Africa and other significant subjects

in his music, all the while continuing a sexually promiscuous life. Veal has taken on the staggering task of portraying a musician/politician/rebel, and he executes it well. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Fela was born in Abeokuta, Nigeria, in 1938 into an upper-middle-class family whose members included several well-known educators and religious figures. In 1958, he was sent to London's Trinity College of Music, where he discovered Charlie Parker and John Coltrane and soon formed his own band, Koola Lobitos. Over the years, he developed a jazz-funk fusion style dubbed Afrobeat. Little known in America, Fela recorded dozens of albums and became an international superstar with a social and political conscience. His blistering attacks on Nigeria's corrupt military government landed him in jail, in exile, and in danger of losing his life. Veal (ethnomusicology, Yale) became interested in Fela nearly 20 years ago as a student at Boston's Berklee College of Music. Extensive notes, a comprehensive bibliography, and a discography reflect the book's scholarly credentials. This is an important work on world music's most influential figure since Bob Marley, but most cost-conscious libraries will want to purchase the paperback edition. DDan Bogey, Clearfield Cty. P.L., Federation, Curwensville, PA Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Arrived as described with a few lines highlighted... overall I'm super happy and excited to read this great perspective on Fela, through the lens of the Ethnomusicologist Michael Veal!!!

This book contains a lot of interesting information concerning Fela Kuti(family background, historical, cultural and political environment) but sometimes I had the distinct feeling I was reading a scientific research report. A little more fluency in writing would have made reading more enjoyable

Really not a good biography. Reading the previous reviews, I was expecting much more than this boring, often academic-written book. Some parts of Fela's life are really obscure in this book, just few words about his mother's death (almost nothing!), nothing about characters as Dr Hindu. Even musically, some fundamental masterpieces of Fela are almost not mentioned, see "Confusion", "Coffin for Head of State". Then, the worst thing is the lack of energy in this book - impossible to hear the spirit of Fela, impossible to find an african feeling, anywhere. This is a huge fault. "Fela: This Bitch of a Life" remains the best book about Fela and his striking indomable spirit. A complete, objective biography on Fela is something really far from this book.

A timely exploration of the father of Afro-beat. Veal, who we learn had occasion to play with Fela and spent time at the Shrine, is obviously a fan of the music and his enthusiasm is palpable. Veal's work is distinguished on many levels. As an ethnomusicologist, Veal offers rigorous descriptions and insights into the compositional aspects of Fela's work. We are given the specifics of Fela's innovations and refinements with Afro-beat. Veal locates Fela's accomplishments within the context of its forbears (E.T. Mensah, James Brown, John Coltrane, etc.) and 20th century African/Afrodiaporic music in general. From Nkrumah to Obasanjo, Veal's discussion of Nigerian/African culture and politics is well researched and thoughtful. There are great nuggets of biographical information from Fela's brief feud with Paul McCartney to November 14th, "Fela Day" in Berkeley (go figure). Veal offers a wealth of information on Fela's family and the impact his parents (his mother in particular) had on his musical and political development. We get the blow-by-blow account of Fela's confrontations with the Nigerian authorities (often, as with the Kalakuta Massacre, in harrowing detail). On the critical theoretical tip, Veal 'samples' Gilroy, Jameson, Fanon, Spivak (and others), engaging in an extended discussion of Fela's compositions as postcolonial 'texts.' Though at times distractingly academic, Veal is rigorous in his deconstruction of Fela and gender, the "specific symbolic and psychological functions" of strategic historical essentialism, mysticism, etc., avoiding the cheap and oversimplistic assessments that often surround the man (often, as Veal notes, in service of hegemonic notions of "civilization"). There is much I loved about this book: the bits about Fela's "punk" approach, the rejoinder to jazzbo(zos) and their complaints about the lack of technical virtuosity in Fela's playing, the similarities between Fela's work and blaxploitation cinema, the Yoruban (tragic) basis of his music, his later compositions as underrated "African symphonies." Veal isn't afraid to write about Fela's misguided relationship with Professor Hindu, the emptiness of Fela's vaguely anarchic rhetoric as a concrete political agenda (Fela wasn't kidding about his aspirations), the problematics of Fela's lifestyle (too much pot, rampant and unprotected sex) and the effect of his lifestyle on his wives. I would have liked to have seen more on the parallels between Fela's development of Afro-beat and the stylistic exchanges with the J.B.s, and the Afrodiasporic interchanges that led to the development of hip-hop and modern dancehall. More on Dennis Bovell's involvement with Fela and more than passing reference to the Biafran conflict. The passage on Fela's continuing influence (and the intense rediscovery taking place as we speak by a new generation of musicians and music lovers) is all too brief. But these are minor quibbles. Veal has written a marvelous book on a man who was, by turns, confrontational, generous, autocratic, wild, and always brilliant. Essential reading on an essential figure. Long live Fela!

Fela is almost as important as Bob Marley in the world of black music, but no one has really written a serious book about him until now, and Michael Veal's book is an excellent one in my opinion. Sometimes it's a bit academic but it still provides a lot of detail on Fela's entire life, on the music of his entire career, and all of the Nigerian political background, which is substantial. I love Fela's music and I knew he was a legend, but I never quite realized how he put his life on the line to make the music he made and say the things he said, and how heavy it became between him and the Nigerian government. And I also never realized how crazy he was - not surprising considering the fact that he was a brilliant (insane?) artist, and also considering how heavy things became as time went on. That this man managed to survive as long as he did and turn out so much great music is nothing short of miraculous! I think the book is an invaluable document of the political and musical legacy of the 1960s as it developed in Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. I learned a lot about Africa, not only musically but culturally and politically too.

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