

Femi Kuti: Afrobeat's undisputed heir

Okechukwu Umelo

When Femi Kuti was 18 years old, his father, afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, gave him the opportunity to perform a solo. The Nigerian musician had been playing with his father's band since he was 16, so was no stranger to concerts. Today, Femi, now 49, inspires other types of shaking. His music enthral listeners with its universal appeal, thanks to funky melodies, conscious lyrics and highly danceable rhythms.

Born in London and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Femi quit school in 1978 to play alto saxophone in his father's band. This was the heyday of Fela and the genre he created – afrobeat. Femi essentially launched his career in 1985, when he was forced to front Fela's 40-piece band, 'Egypt '80', during a performance at the Hollywood Bowl in the United States. His father had been arrested. Femi stepped up that night, wowing the packed crowd by blowing his saxophone in that rude,

muscular and over-confident style that Fela fans had grown to know and love.

Distinct, with a familiar fervour

Femi ended up leading the band for the next two years but broke away to form his own group, 'Positive Force', upon his father's return in 1986. A major turning point in Femi's life was in 1997, when his father died of complications from AIDS. Since that day, Femi has been the foremost standard bearer of afrobeat, bringing it to new audiences.

Comparisons to Fela are inevitable. Like his father, he is a dynamic multi-instrumentalist and exuberant performer but with his own distinct afrobeat sound. Like his father, his lyrics are fuelled with socially conscious, anti-establishment fervour, albeit less controversially. Songs such as 'Sorry sorry', 'Truth don die' and 'Day by Day' lambast corruption, shed light on rampant poverty and other social ills and call on the African masses to strive for change and never forget their past.

Fela would be proud.

Nigerian ingenuity fuels Nollywood's surge

It's 1992. A Nigerian businessman desperately trying to sell a large shipment of blank video cassettes uses them to produce a cheap local film. 'Living in Bondage', the story of a man haunted by his deceased wife's ghost, becomes an instant hit, selling more than half a million copies. Nollywood is born.

Nigeria's film industry is the world's second largest in terms of the number of films produced annually, surpassing Hollywood and hot on the heels of Bollywood. It is also one of the largest employers in Nigeria. With an average shoestring budget of US\$20,000 each, around 200 films are digitally produced every month, mostly for the home video market where they sell for less than two dollars apiece. This cuts production costs, produces healthy profits and ensures that the African masses – many of whom cannot afford to go to the cinema or reach one easily – can purchase a copy. To ensure their global appeal, most heavily marketed Nollywood films are in English, with plots that Africans worldwide can truly relate to.

Annual industry revenues are between US\$250-500 million a year, in spite of trying conditions, rampant piracy, scarce resources and criticisms of poor quality. What's more, Nollywood's success has helped inspire the rise of other African film industries, such as Ghana's 'Ghallywood'.

While the industry continues to call for increased government and foreign investment, new funding sources are becoming available, and producers are increasingly choosing enhanced quality and industry training over quantity. The Oscars are not far away. **0.U**



Before his concert in Belgium, October 2008 © Marie-Martine Buckens