

FEMI KUTI

'DAY BY DAY' - FEMI KUTI

The world is full of celebrity offspring, yet it is almost impossible to think of one who lives up to expectations to the same degree as Femi Kuti, son of Fela, the originator of Afrobeat and former Public Enemy No1 in Nigeria. He is that rarity, a scion whose career rests on talent and hard work rather than the family name.

Born in 1962 in London, where his father was a student, raised in Lagos and a saxophonist with Fela's bands Africa 70 and Egypt 80 from the age of 15, Femi has spent the past 11 years keeping alive his late father's dreams of a Nigeria free of corruption and an Africa able to provide for all its people. Afrobeat that is both hard driving and hard hitting is still the order of the day at the Shrine, the nightclub where Femi and his band, Positive Force, play three times a week, and which he runs with his older sister, Yeni.

His latest studio set, Day By Day, has been a long time coming. It is seven years since Fight To Win, four since the live Africa Shrine, on which you could hear early versions of three of the songs on his new album. "It's been hard work keeping The Shrine alive," he explains. "I've also been on tour, so it was hard to pin me down in a studio until we got to Paris in the summer of 2007." Being a single parent to seven children must be time consuming too. "Oh yes, I have been in Nigeria a lot because they need me, I need to be around them, and be a father for a while as well."

This sabbatical also saw him learning a lot more about being a musician. Femi has learnt to play piano properly and gone back to the trumpet, his first instrument, which he gave up in favour of the sax. The benefits are immediately apparent on Day By Day. "Listen to They Will Run and Better Ask Yourself, they are more jazz than anything I've done before. That's the effect of playing the trumpet coming out."

The addition to the armoury of jazz takes us back to the beginning of the Femi Kuti story. "That's where I got my true inspiration. When I listened to funk I didn't want to play music, I just wanted to dance. But when I listened to jazz, I wanted to play. That and listening to my father."

Steeped in Fela's music and status as de facto Leader of the Opposition in Nigeria, Femi learnt the ropes as bandleader for Egypt 80 when his father was otherwise occupied or detained. In 1985, he made his debut as bandleader at the Hollywood Bowl, while Fela was facing fraud charges. A year later he had split to make his own music with Positive Force.

His 17-piece unit released two African albums, No Cause For Alarm? and MYOB, before being signed by Motown's world-music label, Tabu. In 1995, an eponymous international debut, launched him onto the global stage. They played as fast and as furious as Fela's band but took a (slightly) less confrontational stance and infused the music with contemporary soul.

Fela's death in 1997 put the young man in the spotlight just as his music was reaching maturity. Shoki Shoki came out the following year, a blazing slab of righteous anger that kept alive the Kuti family flame in tracks such as Truth Don Die and Blackman Know Yourself. His songs became anthems, though the Nigerian government made sure he was never played on radio, arguing that the lyrics to one song, Beng Beng Beng, were so lewd he was a danger to public morality.

Never content just to walk in his father's shoes, however, Femi took his music to audiences that might never have heard of Fela. He toured America with alt-rock band Jane's Addiction, sang on Rachid Taha's Made In Medina album and reached out to the American hip-hop community, connecting with people such as Mos Def, D'Angelo, Nile Rodgers, Erykah Badu and the Roots. "It's like I say in Tension Grip Africa," he explains. "I was getting too much international exposure. People were listening to me everywhere. Not just Africans and black Americans, Europeans and white people were listening to me, and the governments here don't white people getting hooked, because they won't turn their backs on me."

He raised the stakes even higher with his next album, Fight To Win, an album that dug deep into Nigerian traditions yet used soul, funk and hip hop. The title track spoke directly to his constituency, the people; Traitors of Africa challenged the most corrupt of all Nigerian governments; and Stop Aids put him at the forefront of the campaign to start educating Africans about the great scourge that had swept through the continent in the 1990s. Enthusiastically received at home and abroad, it nevertheless left him open to attack.

"I had people criticising everything I was doing," he says with a smile. "But I don't pay attention to them, so I don't have them in my thoughts."

Femi returned to Lagos and spent his time running a nightclub, raising his family and improving his musicianship. How successful he was at the latter two tasks can be judged by the contribution to the album of his son Made, who plays on all the tracks on Day By Day. Tours of Britain, Zambia, Kenya and South Africa were followed by an extended visit to Paris for recording. "My producer (Sodi) is in Paris," he explains, "and it is easier to organise things there. We don't have a studio in Lagos that can record the way we record."

As the band launches into Oyimbo, the benefits of recording the Positive Force way become immediately apparent. Femi might shun the 24-minute diatribes favoured by his father - indeed One Two could be the shortest Afrobeat track ever - but in many other ways this is a return to the glory days of Nigeria's big bands, of wailing organs, frantic polyrhythms and behemoth horn sections playing against each other. Yet now the palette is broader. Do You Know and They Will Run are undeniably jazz. You Better Ask Yourself, Oyimbo and Eh Oh carry the air of lost messages from Marvin Gaye or Curtis Mayfield. And then there is the title track, infused with gospel, suffering and ghostly echoes of work songs from the early 20th century. Classic Afrobeat, classic Kuti.

You can tell that the long lay off has inspired Femi. He is upbeat, enthusiastic and raring to go again. "Everybody is back in training now," he smiles, "we have to re-establish my music. We have to come out and play it live, because the record industry is in such a bad shape, we are all suffering."

"Luckily," he laughs, "the African man is used to suffering."

Femi Kuti explains each song on Day By Day.

Oyimbo

Salvation comes from within

Seek and ye shall find

Definitely with music

I'm trying to understand the political situation of the African man, why we are the way we are and the contribution to the downfall of Africa by the West. Right now, the West is trying to exempt itself from our political problems, but they contributed to Mugabe, Mobutu and Kwame Nkrumah. Through music, people now understand that their governments have cooperated in Africa's downfall.

Eh Oh

Sometimes rain go fall ...

This is a song that tries to explain the balance of life. Some places it rains, some places they have no rain, life is like this, life is like that. Eh Oh means 'Yes, it's true'.

Day By Day

Day by day, by night by night

We work and pray for peace to reign

I love songs like this, because the melody just came into my head. And then the words are easy to write. I want to make people understand that we are peaceful, that we don't want to end up in a war like Rwanda, Ethiopia or Somalia. So I'm not saying this is what I do, I'm saying that's what we do, as a human race. We, the peace-loving people, work and pray for peace to reign, we're tired of wars.

Demo Crazy

Demo crazy, make us crazy

Does democracy really work? Anywhere? The kind of government that, when 49 people say Yes and 51 people say No, says that 51 are right? It doesn't work, it's hypocritical. We need a government that is always unanimous towards the progress of the people.

Can you tell me it is working properly? What is happening between your Labour and Conservatives? Conservatives are getting ready to get back into power and for eight years they will be in power, then for another eight years Labour will be in power, and they have been going round and round and round in circles. What is happening today? Your light and electricity bills are worse, your gas is worse, everything is worse. People are not happy, they can't even buy food. And you have been doing this for donkey's years already.

Do You Know

Do you know Miles Davis? Do you know John Coltrane?

Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington? Do you know Billie Holiday?

Do you know Fela Anikulapo Kuti?

I want people to know these people because they contributed to what music is today. So do you know these people? It's important that you know them. These are the people who inspired me and if you know them you will be able to relate to where I come from musically.

You Better Ask Yourself

Everybody's talking, that a saviour will be coming

And he will end all this suffering

But this na same old story

The answers are with you, if you ask the questions. Everybody's talking – they've been talking for 2,000 years - and while we are talking we are getting poorer and the politicians are getting richer, stealing all the money. We are still talking but we have no light or no water. So ask yourself this: why does this continent have the poorest people? Ask yourself, the answers will come.

One Two

Marxism, socialism, call it what you want

Capitalism all na the same oppression dey

Injustice, misuse of power na them speciality

It's my son, Made, at the beginning '1-2-3-4'. That and the chorus, it's just Made. It's one of my favourites, if not my favourite song here. I really love that fast track there. It's the work of Sodi, who did a really good job there. It's so short though, we'll play it and people will be 'Wow what happened there' and we'll have to go back. The best songs are like that.

Tell Me

No money for food, no money for school

The government don't care, politicians don't care, the rich don't care

People are saying they don't know what I am about. How can they say they don't understand why I am complaining? You see the homeless people sleeping under the bridges, in a rich country like Nigeria, and you say you don't understand? You don't understand my politics, you don't understand why I am complaining? You don't understand my cries? Why can't you understand what you are seeing quite blatantly before your eyes?

They Will Run

When trouble comes, they always run

People cause trouble and then leave me standing, like they left my father standing. They always pretend they are Fela's guys, but when the problem comes they chicken out. My father never ran, he stood. They are hypocrites and liars, he was the only one standing.

Tension Grip Africa

This a song about the time, around 2000, when people were scared of the new ideas I was bringing to Africa. Afrobeat was making waves, this tension was gripping Africa. And nobody expected Fela's son to be behaving like I was behaving. And they were not ready, the governments of Africa were not ready for another Fela, so they were scared.

Dem Funny

They think all of us will be fooled

They managed to confuse some of you

It's a song about African leaders. They must be funny, you know, they throw all this shit at us and they expect us to accept it forever. They are funny. They are getting fatter, fatter, buying the best cars, building the best houses, with our money. The resources belong to all of us, the oil is ours, the diamonds are ours. They don't own it.

Let's Make History

It's a positive song to end the album because I am very positive. I have to be. That's why we fight. We fight for a positive change. We make sacrifices so that the people can be better. We challenge ideas for a better tomorrow. If we don't change and make challenges, life becomes stagnant. What is the point of life if we are going to be robots or puppets?