



How Afrobeat(s) Was Hatched: From Kuti to Burna

By Sanya Osha



There was initially a slight conflation between the Afrobeat genre and its later reincarnation as Afrobeats. Recently however, there has been a demarcation between the two genres even though they share certain antecedents of lineage.

Fela Kuti—visionary composer, multi-instrumentalist, radical social activist, cultural renegade, political prisoner and pan-Africanist amongst other things—is regarded as the foremost exponent of Afrobeat and his life and work have been amply documented. Kuti’s brand of Afrobeat emerged after years of experimentation during which he lived in London as a student in the 1950s and 60s and then in Los Angeles in the late 60s. Kuti had studied classical music in England where he also spent time moonlighting in jazz clubs. Jazz, and not classical music, had been his first love. On completing his studies, Kuti returned to Nigeria where he had a stint in broadcasting before going into a full-time career in music.

At the time, West African highlife music was all the rave. Highlife is reputed to have been pioneered by E.T. Mensah, a Ghanaian exponent, but the genre soon gained widespread acceptance all over the West African coast. It was an intoxicating blend of Latin sounds and African polyrhythms served with bluesy horns. Essentially, it was feel-good music with little or no overt political content. It certainly didn’t need to be politically conscious because many African countries were still in a euphoric mood

after recently gaining independence from their erstwhile colonisers.

For a while, Kuti dabbled in what he termed highlife-jazz. And then at the end of the 60s, he visited the United States on a musical tour. On getting there, he discovered that he and his band hadn't obtained the correct visas that would permit them to work. In Los Angeles, he met Sandra Izidore, a young and beautiful African American woman who would change his life.

A student of anthropology, Izidore was also a radical pro-black activist who turned Kuti to the ideology of the Black Panther Party. The civil rights movement had gained tremendous momentum, with black leaders calling for urgent sociopolitical change. Such transformation also meant cultural assertion and empowerment as exemplified by James Brown's radical cry, "Say it loud, I'm black and proud". Brown in turn preached his searing political message through a diet of gut-bucket funk. Funk was unapologetically black at its core; the kind of music that in earlier times would be classified as race music. Basically a groove-based music, its energetic, funky drum patterns and heavy bass lines distinguished it as a form that spoke directly to the gut and soul.

Meanwhile, Kuti was taking copious notes on everything, from the strident political messaging to the indispensability of the groove coupled with the hypnotic and electrifying effects of gut-deep funk. There was clearly a lot to be learnt from a culturally resurgent black America.

Although Kuti deeply admired jazz, he still felt it lacked something. In particular, he believed that more obvious elements of African music needed to be added into the mix. These ingredients included powerful ancient West African drumming traditions. Within those illustrious percussive traditions, drummers had discovered a way to make drums "talk" in honouring their deities and forging stronger communal ties.

Kuti promptly set about incorporating those vital elements of West African music into his ever-expanding repertoire. Apart from his own indigenous Yoruba drumming, these elements included Ghanaian styles, highlife textures, jazzy horns and deep funk grooves. He also learnt about the power of African trance music and its innate spirituality. Having selected these assorted sonic elements, Kuti turned to questions of ideology and political message; it was an unlikely combination of ingredients funnelled through a highly idiosyncratic imagination.

Izidore had preached the necessity to develop a clear political vision. In America, political struggle was defined by the imperatives of black empowerment and the language of civil rights. Back in Nigeria, as the euphoric haze of independence wore off, Kuti was confronted by enervating postcolonial anomie. The ruling classes, both civilian and military, had become insufferably corrupt. Instead of real national development, Kuti saw missed opportunities and truncated potential which infuriated him. He started to lambast the decadent ruling classes and soon incurred their wrath. He was constantly harassed, arrested and beaten by military goons.

But Kuti had found a powerfully distinctive musical voice and an equally impressive political message to sit within it. Fastened together, his sonic template and ideological vision became a formidable weapon that attempted several things all at once: sociopolitical transformation, cultural and aesthetic affirmation, spiritual re-discovery and individual liberation.

Kuti came to be viewed as a disconcerting maverick, an irrepressible icon who spoke fearlessly for the disenfranchised masses, a gadfly who constantly taunted and angered the political and economic elites, and finally, a social rebel who championed the causes of countercultural renegades. He blithely broke all the rules, politically, culturally and musically. And within this restless cauldron of rebellion and experimentation, classical Afrobeat was born, with Kuti as its instantly recognisable face. However, there were other musicians, such as Orlando Julius and Remi Kababa, who also

favoured the genre.

Within Kuti's large and revolving band, many musicians are credited with having played pivotal roles in forging Afrobeat's sonic identity. In this regard, mention must be made of drummer Tony Allen's contributions in laying down the percussive basis of the Afrobeat sound. Although Kuti was the visionary mastermind who assembled all the elements together, he was generous enough to acknowledge Allen's vital inputs. Incidentally, Allen died in Paris during the COVID-19 pandemic at the age of 79.

Another crucial figure in the Afrobeat story is baritone saxophonist Lekan Animashaun who succeeded Allen as band leader when the latter left in 1979 not long after the sacking and razing of Kalakuta Republic, Kuti's countercultural commune, in 1977. The following year, Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Kuti's mother and foremost feminist, who had been flung from an upstairs window during the raid on Kalakuta, died aged 78 as a result of her injuries.

Kuti himself was never the same after this ordeal. He gradually became understandably paranoid, distrustful of even his own well-meaning close friends and associates and increasingly reclusive. His oppression at the hands of the military authorities continued and a change in his sonic template became noticeable. For one, the joie de vivre evident in his earlier compositions rapidly gave way to a sombre, meditative tone which aligned with the spiritual turn of mind that came to inform his general outlook.

Kuti died in 1997 during the reign of Nigeria's most heinous dictator, General Sani Abacha, who himself met his demise the following year. But even before his death, Kuti had been long past his prime, weakened by numerous beatings inflicted by an unforgiving military and HIV/Aids. Sadly, he died a bitter and broken man although ultimately, he had the last laugh. Afrobeat, the genre he pioneered and disseminated against all odds eventually became an attractive idiom, finding proponents all over the world. As this came to pass, his cultural stock increased in value exponentially.

Nollywood, the rough, innovative and adaptable movie industry hatched in the midst of a pulverising economic meltdown and severe sociocultural upheavals soon grew to international prominence on the strength of its DIY ethic. After Kuti's passing, it was yet another cultural phenomenon that, in spite of all odds, attested to the region's cultural vibrancy and resourcefulness. It can be argued that the confidence acquired by Nollywood somehow translated to other distinct yet related cultural pursuits such as music. In other words, the same DIY spirit that had birthed Nollywood eventually produced Afrobeats.

Afrobeats, as distinct from Afrobeat, is less political, arguably less musically accomplished or sophisticated and evidently less aesthetically ambitious. Today's Afrobeats musicians work in a vastly different technological era in which they don't need to learn to play and master what are considered to be traditional musical instruments. All they need is an adept beatmaker.

However, Kuti's Afrobeat is an almost impossible proposition in the current economic environment because he often needed what would appear to be orchestras within orchestras to produce his intricate, lavishly textured sound and hence realise his singularly unique musical vision. Technically, this is very difficult to accomplish presently as the sheer logistics required to achieve this kind of feat are simply mind-boggling.

Kuti also believed strongly in the spiritual dimensions of African music; music was, in other words, an avenue to access ancestral life-worlds and establish historical continuity devoid of the frivolities of the present. In addition, there is also a striving to affirm and express the ineffable. Again, this refers to the spiritual component of classical Afrobeat.

Wizkid, Davido and Burna Boy are regarded as the current superstars of the Afrobeats scene. And in several ways, they are all very different. Wizkid, one of the first breakout Afrobeats stars, has a distinctively mellow voice and is very skilled at ad libs and groove-laden free-styles. Lyrically and politically, there is very little content to his music except that he is often able to deliver feel-good tunes that fill the dance floors. In fairness to him, he does not pretend to be a political messiah or to possess a vision of how society ought to be reformed. He has also become part of the global entertainment industry which readily accepts and promotes stars that lend themselves to easy and unproblematic branding.

The same can be said of Davido, Wizkid's compatriot and frequent rival, who hit the limelight about the same time as the latter. Davido's voice isn't as charming but he makes up for it with an equally astute understanding of the groove and indigenous African rhythms. Other advantages that serve him well are his relentless energy and cannily precise understanding of his strengths and limitations as a musician.

Burna Boy, his multiple successes notwithstanding, is a slightly more demanding figure. Of the three major Afrobeats stars, he draws more directly from Kuti's immense artistic legacy. He has sampled so many of Kuti's compositions that detractors began to question his originality. Incidentally, Burna's grandfather, Benson Idonije, legendary jazz aficionado and broadcaster, had been Kuti's manager in the 60s. So Burna comes from an artistic and ideological pedigree that can be traced right back to Kuti. His most recent musical offering entitled *Twice as Tall* comes barely a year after the Grammy-nominated and BET award-winning album, *African Giant*.

Burna has consistently attempted to infuse socially conscious lyrics in his music, an obvious connection to Kuti's aesthetic. Interestingly, his mother, Bose Ogulu, is a producer of his latest album along with US luminaries P Diddy and Timberland. His sister works on his label as artistic director. Ensuring that his family participates in his artistic journey also chimes with Kuti's understanding of the communal nature of music. However, being transformed into an unproblematic global star entails a more discreet packaging of his overt political agenda. If Burna gets too strident about his political message, sponsors and brands may balk at promoting him.

At the same time, there is clearly an inclination to present himself as a credible artist and not just a dance floor-filling flavour-of-the-month singer. It would be interesting to see how the contradictions between being a true artist and being merely an entertainer in the current music business climate play out. It is a bit early to predict how Burna intends to confront this dilemma as he tries to portray himself as an artist cut from the Kuti cloth while also having an eye on gorgeous video vixens who could make his visuals more interesting. His growing political awakening has to contend with the very real limitations within the music industry and the realities of becoming a veritable global icon.

Meanwhile, performers from all over the world continue to hop onto the Afrobeats wagon, from Beyonce, Drake, Chris Brown, H.E.R., Stormzy, Summer Walker, Wale, Jorja Smith, Sam Smith, Pop Smoke, Teyana Taylor to Afro B and many other globally acclaimed stars. And the morphology of Afrobeats has begun to reflect this astonishing diversity in terms of sound, presentation and potential.

Unlike Nollywood, Afrobeat(s) generally have had greater success as African cultural exports. In his heyday, Kuti almost immediately won over influential fans like the famed jazz pianist Randy Weston, Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, Ginger Baker, Gilberto Gil, Roy Ayers, Hugh Masekela and many other major industry players. There are Afrobeat combos playing in the Kuti mode in Europe, Asia, North and South America. Arguably, there are also more Kuti tribute bands playing abroad than on the African continent. Even before his death, in countries like Colombia, there were numerous cover versions of his songs that Kuti himself probably knew nothing about.

Fela!, the Broadway musical composed by Bill T. Jones and sponsored by Jay Z and Will Smith in 2008, went on to have a successful international run taking in Europe and Africa. Since then another Fela-inspired musical extravaganza produced in Nigeria has gone on tour internationally. There are frequent festivals in France, Britain, the United States, Latin America, South Africa and Nigeria celebrating Kuti's life and work.

Kuti's discography is somewhat confusing for a number of reasons. He was extraordinarily prolific during his almost four-decade long career beginning from the early 60s. He privately established a plethora of record labels and also released many albums through mainstream companies such as EMI and Decca. Some estimates claim he released one hundred and thirty-three albums during his lifetime excluding almost two dozen masterpieces he simply refused to put on wax due to his eventual disillusionment with the music business and societal politics.

As for Afrobeats, in May 2020, US mainstream music outlet, Billboard Magazine, ran a special feature on the global rise of the genre profiling Davido, Tiwa Savage and Mr Eazi. Both Davido and Savage have performed on the US TV Jimmy Fallon show. Mr Eazi entertained US fans alongside Burna Boy in 2019 at the impactful Coachella Festival. His 2020 hit single, Oh My Gawd features Major Lazer and Nicki Minaj. Afrobeats has firmly taken root in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Italy supported by a large African diaspora population and enthusiastic European audiences. It is certainly not a mere passing fad but an increasingly durable fixture on the cultural calendar. Only this year, the UK launched its official Afrobeats music chart. And there are now festivals exclusively devoted to Afrobeats.

Nonetheless, Afrobeats musicians and music audiences around the world are immensely indebted to Kuti for the enormous sacrifices he made to lay the solid foundations for a multi-faceted sonic future, the possibilities of which are yet to be exhaustively explored. Kuti was hardly able to reap the benefits of his astonishing work during his scandal-prone life. Indeed, he was an uncommonly courageous and uncompromising artist who often spurned the advances of international entertainment cartels just as he offended local political elites. And so in order to pursue his work, he had to build his own platforms and networks from scratch which entailed finding his own performance spaces, establishing his own record labels and developing independent channels for the appreciation and distribution of his music.

Kuti fought many battles on multiple fronts and, of course, due to his unyielding stance, he incurred great financial and reputational losses. For instance, he once famously turned down Motown's attempt to buy his diverse back catalogue. But those very losses and sacrifices are what made it possible for Afrobeats to be born. Kuti almost single-handedly charted an aesthetic terrain that is full of yet to be explored musical riches.

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