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# NO STRESS *No frustration* FULL FORCE

Femi Kuti talks life, legacy and the importance of family.  
“I’m very much my father’s son,” he tells **Jane Cornwell**

Femi Kuti isn’t the firebrand he used to be. He says so, rather a lot. “I’ve mellowed,” he insists, sitting at home in Lagos, Nigeria, in a practice room-cum-office with family photos on the wall, an old saxophone on the floor and a display cabinet full of awards and citations in a corner. “Twenty years ago, I was a very angry person. [Now,] I’m more comfortable with where I am and who I am.”

“I still get upset because of the political climate in Nigeria,” he says. “But slowly I have found peace with my family. My practicing” – he plays his sax for six hours each day – “helps me stay humble. I try to embrace life as it embraces me.”

At 61, the Afrobeat scion – eldest son of the late great ‘Black President’, Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti – is living the values espoused by the moniker of his band The Positive Force, which he founded in 1986 with the likes of Dele Sosimi, Fela’s former keyboardist. The original line-up is long gone: “You start out as mates then misunderstandings happen and you grow out of friendship.” A shrug. “You have to be true to your passion.”

A photograph of Fela is there behind him, arms raised over his head like a prize fighter. Femi Kuti, 61, has continued his father’s work, using music as a weapon with which to fight corruption and oppression, to make one think as well as dance. His 11th, and most recent, studio album, 2021’s *Stop the Hate*, finds him channelling skittering guitar riffs and fanfare-style horns on tracks called things like ‘Pà Pà Pà’ and ‘Na Bigmanism Spoil Government’, whose simple yet biting lyrics remind people of their agency as citizens. ‘*Na bigmanism spoil government*,’ he sings in his keening falsetto. ‘*Come on, tell them, let them hear, let them change their ways.*’

*Stop the Hate* was re-packaged as a double album with *For(e)ward*, the hip-hop-flecked debut by Femi’s eldest son, Mádé Kuti (see #165, March 2021), and released as *Legacy+*. Nominated for Best Global Music Album at the 2022 Grammy Awards, *Legacy+* highlights father and son’s musical synergy (“He’s awesome, a genius,” purrs Femi). It keeps the Kuti flag flying.

Not that it was ever at half-mast. Afrobeat – Fela’s hard driving African answer to American funk, distinguished by ultra-long groove excursions with vibing soul vamps, Ghanaian highlife melodies and a fierce socio-political message – has been enjoying a resurgence for a while now. Afrobeat-inspired bands have flourished internationally: in Brazil, Bixiga 70. In Chile, Newen Afrobeat. In Australia, The Shaolin Afronauts. In Lithuania, Ojiba Afrobeat. In the UK, London Afrobeat Collective.

“Nobody will ever be like Fela,” says Femi of the Nigerian revolutionary (1938-1997) who left a catalogue of over 50 albums, and whose phenomenal life story was told in the award-winning 2008 Broadway musical *FELA!* A classically-trained graduate of Trinity College of Music (now Trinity Laban), Fela could have lived a nice life outside of Africa but he chose to remain in Lagos, Nigeria’s sprawling capital, where he was a thorn in the side of a brutal military government that pulled out all stops to try and shut him up.

“I am happy that people are playing the music because of their love for my father. Some even tell me they are inspired by me,” he says. “Of course, to really sound like Fela you’d have to go through his experience, [to have] known the pain of the beatings and imprisonment. I’m coming from the fact that I live in Nigeria and I see the corruption. And as Fela’s son, I witnessed some of what went on.”

While Femi’s late mother Remi Ransome-Kuti left Fela early on, the teenaged Femi chose to live with his father in a household rammed with friends and hangers on, inside the communal compound – complete with recording studio and free health clinic – famously deemed the Kalakuta Republic.

“Mádé is adding another perspective... the world needs to see him. He studied at Trinity, like my father,” he says. “Fela was trained; you can hear that in his music. You can hear it in Mádé’s music. I am self-taught so I’m more rugged, more from the streets. I was just roaming as a kid.”

“I just sort of put things together [musically]. Don’t ask me now how I did it; I don’t know.” ▶

