

In The Name of the Father

Seun Kuti is not afraid of legacy. He took over his father Fela Kuti's illustrious band, Egypt 80, when Fela died. More recently, Seun revived Fela's political party, Movement of the People. He's also continued the anti-authoritarian spirit that has seen mainstream acceptance hard to come by. With a new album ready, his first in six years and one featuring an all-star cast – Damien Marley, Sampa The Great, Lenny Kravitz – Seun hopes to make the breakthrough. “Reaching the people without the mainstream is not easy,” he tells *Jane Cornwell*



A lot of big names in music like to work with Seun Kuti, and not just because of whose son he is. Blessed with talent, committed to authenticity, variously given to championing human rights, pan-Africanism and most recently, Movement of the People (MOP), the leftwing organisation originally founded by his father Fela, the 41-year-old Nigerian singer, saxophonist and bandleader carries the Afrobeat legacy like a flaming torch.

Scorching the corrupt. Fanning the embers of revolution. Empowering individuals with the sense that they can – that they must – make a difference.

Oluseun Anikulapo Kuti, Fela's youngest, was 14 when his iconic paterfamilias died in 1997. He'd already been appearing with the 14-piece Egypt 80, a mini-me in sunglasses and flares, and while some cautioned against his decision to front the ensemble, he went ahead and did it anyway. He lifted his manifesto from Fela's playbook, where acting for the greater good is sealed with frenetic dancing. Where excoriating lyrics are delivered over a wall of horns, alongside simmering spoken word *yabi* diatribes and flamboyant bum-whirling choreography. With that road-tested, heady mix of funk, jazz, soul and West African styles that is a Kuti trademark.

Five albums. A Grammy nomination. Sold-out gigs around the world. Kuti is a hugely charismatic frontman, with his cheekbones, low-slung sax and lithe, fizzing energy the spit of his dad. A map of the Motherland is tattooed over his heart. The words 'FELA LIVES' are emblazoned across his back. Is it any wonder celebrated US singer/musician Lenny Kravitz offered to executive produce Kuti's new sixth album *Heavier Yet (Lays the Crownless Head)*? Or that the likes of Damian Marley and Zambian rapper *du jour* Sampa The Great put their hands up for guest features?

"I'm open to the world, so the world is receptive to me," says a genial, bare-chested Kuti, seated at home in Lagos, spliff in hand, a framed poster of Che Guevara on the wall behind him. "Three years ago Lenny and I were following each other on Instagram, so I dropped into his DMs. He gave me his number, then we spoke for two hours. He has brought me to his home and has been by our side."

"Damian happened because the ancestors said it must. Sampa is an artist I admire, and her enthusiasm for the song" – 'Emi Aluta', a homage to revolutionary struggle – "was powerful."

Heavier Yet... comes six years after *Black Times*, which featured a Che-style cover photo of a cigar-smoking Kuti, had Carlos Santana playing guitar on its title-track ("He mentioned me and my lyrics in his autobiography, so I called him up") and was produced by multi-Grammy-winning jazzier Robert Glasper. That project took inspiration from American socialist and Pan-Africanist WEB Du Bois, for whom Black liberation lay in self-knowledge and Black education, and namechecked freedom fighters from Patrice Lumumba and Thomas Sankara to Stokely Carmichael and Shaka Zulu along the way.

"This new album is an extension of *Black Times* in terms of expanding on my theories of class consciousness as a

“Love for me is a force that can change the world”



uniting force for global change," says Kuti of *Heavier Yet...*'s six thrilling tracks.

Among them, 'Dey (feat Damian Marley)' ("About embracing and championing who we are, regardless"); 'T.O.P.', a track that advocates for nature and empathy over money and success ("While I like to chill by relaxing by the beach, I feel most a part of nature when I am marching with the people"); and 'Love & Revolution', a tribute to Yeide Kuti, Kuti's life partner of 17 years, more of whom later.

"I used to think that my father was a revolutionary who fought the government" – Fela's 1976 opus *Zombie* provoked a brutal military attack on the Kalakuta Republic commune in which Seun grew up – "but I have realised in my growing years that most of his songs stood against elitism. That they empowered the working class in all their original mess. I saw that he stood on the shoulders of his mother [anti-colonial feminist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti], who stood on the shoulders of Kwame Nkrumah [pan-Africanist and former president of Ghana], who stood on those of Marcus Garvey [the Jamaican-born proponent of Black nationalism], who was inspired by ancient African traditions."

He pauses for a beat. "It is fascinating to me how, in this modern era, humanity's ability to achieve, to understand the goals of our natural class, is being increasingly betrayed by huge numbers of people who are buying into elitism and thinking that they're millionaires-in-waiting."

Blame capitalist propaganda. "Americans, for example, are only two per cent of the world's population but they consume about a quarter of the world's resources. Our Earth cannot sustain that."

"So the title of the album plays on the idea that the crownless head is heavier than the heads who wear the crowns. The ones who sit on boards of corporations and push their greed and class interests forward, who prevent the people from having a say in democracy, in their own lives."

Kuti's rage has often felt sharper than that of his 22-year-old musician half-brother Femi, becoming even more steely over time. He emphasises how phenomenal it is that his father's band, despite line-up changes, is still firing on all cylinders as an entity, 27 years after his death. "Five albums in they are still proving that they are not just a memorial band," says Kuti, a graduate in music and sound technology from the UK's Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts, who did all the arranging on *Heavier Yet...* "They are keeping the energy alive, making music at the forefront of the art." ▶