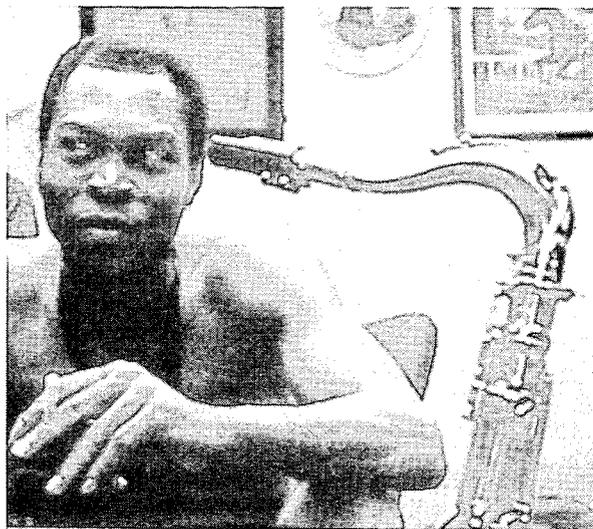


# Revolutionary Nigerian Musician Jailed

Fela Anikulapo Kuti is sitting in a Nigerian jail cell. On December 25th, the Nigerian Supreme Military Council announced the outrageous conviction and five-year prison sentence of this rebel "Afrobeat" musician, which stem from trumped-up currency law violations. In August 1984, Fela was leaving for a concert tour of the U.S. with his band, Egypt 80, when the Nigerian customs police, after strip-searching and individually escorting each member onto the plane, arrested him, supposedly for "smuggling" £1600 out of the country. Fela's band and dancers had to tour without him.

Nigerian law permits a maximum of £80 for outside travel. But Fela was slapped with charges of currency trafficking, even though the £1600 was to cover touring expenses for all thirty-six of his band members!...well within the limit. After his release, the authorities refused to let him join the band, so he called a press conference, which is illegal in Nigeria. He was promptly rearrested, this time for "defamation" of the government—before he even had time to denounce them. Thrown into prison, he was then tried on October 22nd for the bogus currency charges which were reinstated, and sentenced to five years on November 8th. The Military Council's December 25th ratification of his conviction and sentencing left him without any legal appeals, according to Nigerian law.

Clearly it is Fela's music and his revolutionary nationalist hatred of imperialism and neo-colonialism that the Nigerian authorities, most likely with the ample cooperation of the U.S. government, are anxious to keep behind bars. His "Afrobeat," or what some call African jazz, has become immensely popular throughout the world, a driving



combination of funk, soul and jazz, rooted in African national forms such as the ancient griot tradition of "singing" the news. Treating music as what he considers "the weapon of the future," Fela sings against oppression, mocking both the I.T.T.'s (International Thief Thiefs as one of his songs is titled) stalking Africa, and the vagabonds in power, or VIPs, as he calls them. This has brought him to tangle more than once with the corrupt Nigerian rulers he likes to expose.

The Nigerian authorities have been on the warpath against him for years, jailing him repeatedly, banning his music, and stealing his royalties. In 1970 he and his band set up a village in a poor section of Lagos which grew into a cultural and political centre of resistance to the Westernisation of Nigeria, attracting more and more followers. Kalakuta came to be known as a sort of independent "republic," naturally antagonising the military junta. Machine guns and bazookas blazing, a thousand Nigerian soldiers stormed and destroyed his compound in February 1977 making

numerous arrests and reportedly raping women. Fela's mother died of complications from a beating there, and Fela was forced into exile for a year.

Fela Kuti is easily one of the most popular musicians in West Africa today, and his more than 50 albums have sold in the hundreds of thousands all over the world. Yet he has had long-standing difficulties getting a major record contract, and a certain collaboration has existed between the U.S. and Nigerian bourgeoisies, preventing large-scale promotion of Fela and his music. That he was on the verge of breaking through this with his first U.S. concert tour since 1969 makes the timing of this clampdown very foul indeed. Furthermore, just before he was stopped from going to the U.S. he had signed a contract but the record company had refused to put up money for the tour. Then, after all the "political problems" that ensued, they dropped him. It is obvious that the Nigerian government in particular is bent on silencing this rebellious artist whose music and wide international popularity they

find highly embarrassing. Entering the U.S. record industry would of course just raise the political price they have to pay to suppress him at home. In a London newspaper account published before Fela's conviction the Nigerian military government chief of staff is quoted as saying he would "make sure that Fela is jailed...and I hope he rots in jail."

From his prison cell, Fela wrote to a friend: "I will never stop fighting.

This [jail] only makes me stronger, and I hope it's giving my people more courage to do their part in the struggle." Support concerts are planned in the U.S. and Europe to free Fela Kuti. Protest statements and telegrams from around the world have been sent to the Nigerian government demanding his immediate release.

In the progressive music scene of today, Fela Kuti definitely represents an interesting and impor-

tant phenomenon, a voice from Africa who has not stepped aside from the anti-imperialist struggle and who deserves support in this political attack. As a rebel artist whose political views largely coincide with Pan-Africanism, his music strikes a powerful anti-imperialist chord among the large audiences that follow him. His song "I.T.T." begins, "Na true I want talk again"...and this musician has something to say. Free Fela Kuti!■