



Finding Fela! Discussion Guide

Director: Alex Gibney

Year: 2014

Time: 119 min

You might know this director from:

Mr. Dynamite: The Rise of James Brown (2014)

The Armstrong Lie (2013)

We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks (2013)

The Last Gladiators (2011)

My Trip to Al-Qaeda (2010)

Taxi to the Dark Side (2007)

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

Most people know Bob Marley, Che Guevara, and John Lennon. Why not Fela Kuti? Having founded a musical genre and spent the majority of his life railing against political dictatorship and injustices across Africa, it wasn't until a musical hit Broadway 10 years after his death that the public came to recognize his name. FINDING FELA! is both a journey through the archives of Fela's life and a study of the Broadway musical Fela!

Nigerian-born Fela Kuti believed that "music is the weapon of the future." He mastered his craft and ensured that his music reached the fields of injustice and hardship faced by fellow Nigerians. But he didn't stop there. He also built a hippy-style commune for creative people to live. However, Kuti was not an easy, peace-loving artist. He fed off of opposition, his passion fueled by the fight. He was a perfectionist who demanded the best. An unforgiving band leader and an unfaithful husband and father, Fela arguably demanded a more sophisticated ear than the musical and revolutionary heroes to which many are accustomed.

How could such a fiery, fervent man be brought to the Broadway stage and sold at New York prices? The film and musical brought Kuti to a wider audience, and yet he remains a mystery. Perhaps it is only when listening to one of his many albums that we can begin to discover the truth to this revolutionary, this musician, this man, Fela.

FILM THEMES

A man who was influenced by Bob Marley and Che Guevara reaches the world through a Broadway musical. Herein lies one of the many mysteries of Fela Kuti.

FELA THE REVOLUTIONARY

The trouble-making, rabble-rousing Fela spent his adult life shaking up the system, using music as a platform from which to expound on his political views. He had revolutionary ideas for creating an Africa for all. Born into a family that questioned authority, his mother being a pioneer in the fight for African women's rights, Fela was an underground icon in his earlier years. As he developed into a hero of the poor and began to champion social change, he became more determined, despite the risks. Police beatings only fueled his fire, as Fela – a picture of the perfect revolutionary – never surrendered to the forces against him.

FELA THE MUSICIAN

You can track the rhythm of Fela's life through his music, which reflected where he was amidst the socio-political climate of his country. As a product of his time, Fela's music resounded with the conditions into which it was played. By singing in pidgin, Fela connected to the poor. By fusing Western jazz and African highlife, he created Afrobeat, music to dance with into politics. As the political climate became more strained, Fela's music became more disciplined. With the loss of his mother, his music embraced a deeper spirituality. Music served as a reflection of wherever Fela Kuti found himself at any given moment.

FELA THE POLYGAMIST

"Women must know their place in society. As soon as you are in your family's house, your husband can kick your ass," stated Kuti. Fela the womanizer, the polygamist, the man with an insatiable sex drive, was something choreographer Bill T. Jones grappled with when taking the formidable task of portraying Fela the man. African society in the 1970s placed women lower than men. Sex was a power that Fela wielded over women, a power that arguably killed him in the end through the contraction of HIV. By convincing 27 women to marry him, Fela disregarded the vows he made with his first wife and went his own way.

FELA! THE MUSICAL

Ranked with some of the greats, Fela somehow passed beneath the international radar for many years. Perhaps by choosing to spend his entire life in Nigeria, never chasing the good life, but remaining doggedly true to his African roots kept him out of the public conscience. His story could not be silenced forever, however, and producers of Fela! the musical brought the powerful tale of Fela's life, music, and political movement to the general public. The Broadway rendition was carefully translated and put into a Western context to be both accessible and impassioned. Fela Kuti hit the worldwide stage.

"As far as Africa is concerned, music cannot be for enjoyment. Music has to be for revolution."

Fela Kuti

"You have a platform. Use this music to educate, elevate, and lift one's mind."

Sandra Izsadore

"[Fela] was the first countercultural hero on a large scale in sub-Saharan Africa."

Questlove

FILM FACTS:

- Stephen Hendel, a New York commodities trader, was searching for new music to listen to when he came across Fela Kuti. Inspired by the music, he convinced his wife Ruth, a theater producer, to bring Fela's music to a wider audience. Thus the Fela! Broadway musical was born. Along with choreographer Bill T. Jones and writer Jim Lewis, the musical came about after 2 years of development. It focuses in on a certain period of Fela's life in the late 1970s. The musical has played across the globe, including in Fela's hometown of Lagos, Nigeria.
- Fela! choreographer Bill T. Jones is himself a classical ballet and modern dancer. He lives in New York, where he runs New York Live Arts and creates works for dance companies.
- While in London in the late 1950s, Fela Kuti formed Koola Lobitos, a band playing a fusion of jazz and highlife. There he met his first and only legal wife, Remilekun Taylor, whose father was Nigerian and mother was African-American, Native American, and British. Fela and Remi were married in London and had 3 children: Yeni, Femi (born in London), and Sola (born in Lagos).
- At the age of 18, Fela worked as a clerk in the Federal Ministry of Commerce and Industries in Lagos, a job he held for 6 months.
- Sola Anikulapo Kuti, one of Fela's daughters and a dancer in his Egypt '80 band, died of cancer in 1997, just a few months after her father.
- Founded in 1998 by Fela's eldest child Yeni, Felabration is an annual festival of music and arts celebrating the life of Fela Kuti. The week-long event, held at the New Africa Shrine in, is partly sponsored by the Nigerian government.
- The first two cases of HIV and AIDS in Nigeria were reported at a 1986 international AIDS conference. An estimated 3.7% of the Nigerian population in 2014 was living with HIV.
- Often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" for its large population, Nigeria has a population of 174 million, making it the most populous nation in Africa and 7th in the world. Over 500 ethnic groups call Nigeria home, with approximately half practicing Christianity and the other half Muslim. Due to its wealth of oil reserves, the Nigerian economy became Africa's biggest in 2014, worth \$500 billion, making it the world's 21st largest economy. The Nigerian government is a federal republic modeled after the U.S.
- The highlife music genre, which Fela Kuti played before founding Afrobeat, was founded in Ghana in the early 1900s and is characterized by jazzy horns and multiple guitars leading the band.
- Fela Kuti coined the term Afrobeat after a 1969 U.S. tour. Kuti incorporated up to 30 musicians in his ensemble, playing bass, conga, drums, guitar, horns, keyboards, saxophone, vocals, and the traditional Nigerian Gbedu drum, an 8-foot-high ceremonial percussion instrument.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Listen to Fela Kuti's music. Visit the Knitting Factory Records website to access his past archive.
2. UNICEF works in Nigeria to promote the rights of women and children in the areas of health and nutrition, basic education, and water and sanitation. Consider supporting their cause.
3. Playing For Change is a foundation that aims to connect the world through music with the underlying belief that "music has the power to break down boundaries and overcome distances between people."
4. Participate in AVERT's work to address AIDS across the globe through education, treatment, and care.

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